

Take My Whole Life Too by ajwritesthings

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Summary:

Five years after escaping the top security facility that she had been imprisoned in for her entire life, twenty-one year old El is hiding in plain sight with her fellow super-powered escapee, Max. Using fake names and forged identities, the two try to find purpose in their everyday lives while also dealing with the haunting mistakes that were made in their pasts.

Finally comfortable in her concealed life, El is working in a local bookstore when a tall, freckled boy with eyes as dark as midnight stumbles into her life. Mike Wheeler makes her head spin and shows her life as she has never known it before.

When dark memories are brought back into her life, will El allow her loved-ones to face the danger with her? Will she clue them in on her past and the horrors within it? Or do they already know more than she thinks?

Modern Day AU with a superhero twist.

1. Subjects

Her bloodshot eyes shot open in the bright room, head splitting with white hot pain, mind lagging and sore. *Too much. Too much. Too much.* They'd pushed her too hard. Asked her to go too far. She couldn't say anything though, that would only make things worse.

Swaying in her seat at the cold, metal table, El could feel her energy fading quickly. The adrenaline rush was gone and in its place left the small teenage girl wanting nothing more than to hide in a corner to cry. Black spots dotted her vision, making it difficult to see the men in front of her. She couldn't make out what they were saying to her, ears pounding as if she was stuck underwater. *Too much. Too much. Too much.*

"Subject Eleven, did you confirm the target's location?" The tall man in the suit slid the picture closer to her. "Subject Eleven, it is imperative you confirm the location in order to complete the mission."

Her head was throbbing, body aching all over. Slowly, she nodded.

"Excellent. Bring in Subjects Twelve and Thirteen."

She wanted to tell him no, she couldn't do more right now. That she was tired and close to collapse. She wanted to tell him to go away, to leave her friends alone. She wanted to say anything to make it all stop, but words failed her once again. She knew it wouldn't have mattered anyways.

The door beeped three times before opening, indicating high risk subjects were entering the room. A pale girl with long flaming red hair entered, held tightly at the arms by two armed guards. They shuffled her over to the table and roughly sat her down opposite of El.

El watched her squirm in her seat through half-closed eyes. In the back of her mind, she thought about how she'd always admired Max's hair. Long and wavy, colorful and bright, El couldn't help but feel jealous that they hadn't cut off Max's hair when they'd taken her over

a year ago. It was unnecessary, they'd said.

The guards forcefully strapped Max's arms down to the middle of the table, handcuffing her to the spot. She groaned and El smiled as she barely caught Max mumbling, "Always a pleasure, dipshits," through gritted teeth.

The door beeped three times again, a tall boy entering this time accompanied by his own set of guards. El noticed immediately that he was limping. Dark bruises running up and down his left ankle were just barely visible under the hospital gown. He also seemed to be sporting a nasty cut across his cheek.

Will caught El's eyes and shook his head minutely, enough for her to get the message: *not now*.

He sat down gingerly in his seat next to El, his small movements indicating that he too was drained. A wave of dread shot through El. It was one thing for only one of them to fail, but for two of them to prove unsuccessful meant only more punishment and pain.

"Subject Eleven has confirmed the location of this target." The man put down copies of the picture in front of Max and Will. "Go in, get the files, and return. You will have approximately ten minutes to do so."

All three of them knew the, " *or else...*" that was meant to follow his sentence was left out intentionally. They all knew exactly what would happen to them if they failed.

"Subject Twelve," the man nodded at Will. "Form the connection with Subject Eleven."

Will slowly extended a hand towards El. Gently she took it, swaying a bit in her seat. *Too much. Too much. Too much.*

The man nodded towards Max. "Now with Subject Thirteen as well. Remember, ten minutes."

Reaching across the table to Max's restrained hands, Will took hold of her, closing his eyes and instantly taking the three of them away from the cold, dangerous room.

“Will, what happened to you?! You look like absolute shit.” Max was the first to speak, her panicked voice echoing in the Void. They didn’t have much time alone, the clock ticking away.

“That one guard with the bald spot thought I was messing with him. Said he was hearing a voice in his head. He got me last night.” Will grimaced at the memory. “I’m okay, just banged up. My leg hurts like hell though.” He tenderly gestured to his ankle, which looked worse in the dark glow.

“Were you? Messing with him?” Max questioned with frown. Will glanced up, smirking as he crossed his arms over his chest.

“Oh you bet I was. Whatever though, it was worth it. The asshole had been swiping half of my food for two weeks.”

Max nodded approvingly before she glanced at El, who was wobbling where she stood. “Hey, are you okay? Sit down, we’ll be out of here soon.” El nodded, her eyes drooping and fluttering. Will limped over, putting a steadying hand on her back as he helped her lay down on the wet ground of the Void.

“Ready?” Will asked hopefully, extending a hand.

She nodded shakily. “Hurry.”

El clasped her small fingers around Will’s, closing her eyes and picturing the location of the office they were targeting. She could feel him in her head, searching, scanning, reading each detail she allowed him to see.

Both of them opened their eyes when he was done, the information transmitted from one mind to the other.

“That’s all of it?” He said quickly, she nodded. “Alright. You ready, Max?” Will gestured over to Max who sat on her knees next to the pair.

“As if I have a choice.” She responded with a smirk, grabbing his hand and closing her eyes as well.

El watched from her spot between the two, her headache only worsening the more time she spent in the Void. *Too much. Too much. Too much.*

Max and Will's eyes fluttered back and forth, as if there was a whole world beneath their eyelids that El couldn't see. After a few minutes, Will shot back up, breathing deeply and reaching up to rub his temples. He remained in his spot next to El, and leaned against her for support.

It was as if Max was in a trance. Her eyes remained closed, but she stood up and moved around the Void. Tiptoeing around invisible objects, squatting down to unlock a door that only she could see, lifting things that weren't there, typing on a computer that they could not see. She operated swiftly and meticulously for several long minutes.

El knew that Max was somewhere else in her mind, seeing the exact location that El and Will had given her through the transfer of powers. El knew that somehow Max was able to interact with what they had given her, that while she seemed to be doing mindless tasks in the Void, Max was actually contacting and existing in the outside world, to a degree.

In the back of her mind, El heard a nonexistent clock ticking away—they were given only ten minutes, how long had it been already?

Will seemed to have the same concern. "Hurry up, Max," he whispered nervously.

Another long minute passed when in the flash of an instant, Max straightened up from her hunched position. Her eyes were astonishingly wide as she spun around frantically looking for El and Will.

Max looked paler than El had ever seen her before, she stood stunned for a moment before rushing over to them.

"Did you get it?" Will asked desperately. Max just stared at him, mouth agape for a second until she responded.

“What? Oh yeah I got it, but you guys, I think I just-I don’t know for sure-but I think I might’ve just found a way out. I have to look back at it all and I don’t know really if this would work-but then again how could it not? You know what no, there’s no way this would-well maybe this is actually the *only* way, well I don’t know for sure but it might just work!” She spoke hurriedly, her words running a mile a minute.

Will and El shared a confused look. “Woah, woah, woah slow down. What is it that you fou-”

Will couldn’t finish his thought however as he was abruptly cut off by Brenner’s sinister voice barking through the Void.

“Time’s up.”

This was not the first time they’d all been together on a mission. On the contrary, they seemed to be going on more and more each week. Finding people, getting information, hacking into databases all from the prison of the facility in which they were trapped. They had done a lot together, none of them knew for sure what it was for, but they knew it wasn’t good.

Eleven knew very little about the outside world, having grown up inside the facility for the last sixteen years. Deprived of love, laughter, and friendship, she was shocked when two years ago, during a test of her powers, the men in suits brought a boy in the testing room with her.

He was even smaller than she was at the time, his head freshly shaved with deep, dark circles under his eyes. She had sat there in shock, reeling from this new development, from another *kid* like her.

A man in a lab coat explained, to the best of his ability considering her lack of vocabulary, that Subject Twelve had powers as well. Different from her own, but powerful nonetheless. Subject Twelve could see into the minds of others who were within close proximity. It wasn’t easy, but he could read thoughts and project images, influencing decisions and transmitting information. Subject Twelve

could also create links through people who were, “specially skilled.” People like her.

They had forced him to show her the link, to take her into the Void where she was sent to find people. The moment the connection was made, he spoke to her.

“Do you have any idea where we are? W-what this is? Why are they calling me Subject Twelve?” He was frantic, his voice trembling. She just looked at him with wide eyes, not sure what to say. “M-my mom and dad, they’re going to look for me. They know I was taken, do you know how to get out of here?”

Eleven was more focused on the fact that she was not alone in the Void anymore. It was remarkable, she’d never had company before. Could they hear this?

Staring back with wide eyes, Eleven had whispered, “Mom...and dad?” She looked at him curiously, these were new words.

He began pacing, his footsteps echoing through the water, “Yeah, my mom and dad, you know, my parents. Joyce and Jim Hopper.” He said all this as if she had any clue who they were. The boy stopped pacing and faced Eleven. “My name is Will. Will Byers. N-not Subject Twelve.” It sounded more like he was confirming this to himself rather than telling her. She saw that his eyes were wet.

“What’s your name?” He paused expectantly.

She had gaped at him for a prolonged minute. “...T-they call me Eleven.” She didn’t know if this was the right answer. The name they’d given *him* had ended up being the wrong one, so she could be wrong as well.

Will looked at her a long while, scanning her up and down. El shrunk under his gaze. She hated being watched. His brown eyes, a moment ago filled with anxiety and panic, settled with a horrifying realization.

Under his breath, Will had whispered, “You’ve been here a long time, haven’t you?” Eleven met his eyes, a questioning look dawning on

her face. She chose her words as best she could.

Eleven's small, scratchy voice echoed in the Void. "I... haven't ever...not been here."

A white hot pain shot through her mind, and instantly they were back in the cold room together. Convulsing and shaking in their seats, the men in coats pulled away the tasers held to Eleven and Will's necks, leaving the two kids panting and shaking. Trembling heavily, Eleven glanced at Will, a defeated grimace settling into his features.

For a year, that was how they would see each other.

It didn't seem like the guards or the men in suits could hear them or listen into their conversations in the Void. So, when the guards brought them together for missions, they would spend a few minutes talking, getting to know each other. Will telling her all about his parents and his life before they took him.

Eleven loved listening to his stories, she felt warmth bubble inside her as she pictured a life outside the walls of the facility. A world without punishments or missions, one filled with "friends" and "loved ones" as Will called them. He never gave up hope that his mom and dad would find him, that they would rescue both of them away from this place.

"Once we're out of here, El, you can live with us, and have a normal life. There's not much space in our house, but we could share a room for sure!"

As the months went by, however, El could see this expectation he had turn slowly into more of a dream than anything.

For a long year it was just the two of them, forced to work together. El would find people and Will would plant images and thoughts into their minds. They learned not to go against what the men in suits and lab coats ordered them to do, as it only led to beatings, starvation, and isolation.

But then one day, there was someone else.

Will and El had sat unmoving at the cold metal table, eyes glued to the face of the new girl sitting with them. Her icy eyes stayed on her hands folded in her lap. A thumping bruise seemed to be purpling under her eye.

El and Will shared a knowing look, they both desperately wanted to reach out and speak to her, but the guards monitoring them held back any urges.

Dr. Brenner, seemingly the man in charge, had entered the room, “This is Subject Thirteen. She possesses the ability to read all forms of technology and memorize it’s language. We also believe she may be able to interact with foreign environments while still remaining in the confines of this facility. Subject Eleven, Subject Twelve, I would like you to show her what it is we do around here. You will have five minutes to do so.

They both nodded, Subject Thirteen looked up from her hands, confusion painted on her face. Will and El held hands, the former slowly clasping onto Subject Thirteen’s long fingers.

She was a whirlwind of color and vibrancy the second they entered the Void.

“Where the HELL am I and who the HELL are you people?” She had shrieked dangerously at them through tight lips.

El had taken a few steps back immediately, overwhelmed by the noise and sudden energy. She was so used to Will’s calming presence in the Void that this sudden shift in normalcy left her feeling as small as ever. Will, however, did not seem perturbed by her loud reaction, he stood his ground and kindly asked what the girl’s name was.

“Max. Max Mayfield. Not Subject-fucking-Thirteen.” She had said exasperatedly, eyes narrowing with distrust in their direction.

Will had put his hands up, a show of civility and harmlessness. “My name is Will Byers, and this is Eleven, El for short. Let me explain to you exactly what’s going on here.”

And he had, patiently answering any questions she had along the

way. Will did a much better job at explaining than El had, her words at first didn't seem to make him understand that there was no escaping this place, that there was no way out.

"So you're telling me we're trapped in this place, doing 'missions' for some secret organization? Fuck that, I'm not doing jack-shit for any of these scumbags. I've dealt with plenty of people manipulating me for my powers. I can take a few punches, but I'm getting myself out of here."

Max had said this with full confidence, her arms gesturing wildly. She seemed to have enough faith in herself that for a split second, El had even believed her.

Reality quickly sunk in when the threatening voice of Dr. Brenner echoed through the Void. "Five minutes is up."

Will and El frantically clasped each other's hands, El's arm outstretched for Max to hold on to. Max had narrowed her eyes, taking a cautious step back away from the pair.

"Max, come on, we have to go back now. Please, trust me you don't want to know what will happen if we disobey." Will pleaded desperately. His eyes were fearful, begging Max to trust him. Max looked unsurely at the two, her stance wide as if ready for an attack. El and Will knew they were taking too long to come back, but Max wouldn't take their hands to make the reconnection, the safest and only painless way to get back to the real world.

Fire spread under El's ribcage as she felt the burning pain of the taser connect with her skin. Instantly, she was back, gripping her chair with white knuckled fists. Through heavy-lidded eyes, she saw both Max and Will slumped in their chairs, reeling from the same pain she felt.

Brenner approached Max. "Subject Thirteen, you will quickly learn that we do not tolerate any misbehaviors or shows of rebellion. In order to get this through your *thick* skull, I think it would be best if you spent some time...alone. Three days ought to-"

"My fault." El had said with a small voice. "I kept us." She kept her

eyes to the ground, though she could feel Brenner's gaze burning holes through her. A quick glance up allowed her to see Max's mouth hanging slightly open, aghast. Will sat expressionless, though El saw his eye twitching a bit.

Brenner put a heavy hand on the back of El's neck. "Very well. Some time alone should remind you to be more prompt next time." He had pulled her up by the scruff of her neck and pushed her unsparingly in the direction of the door, where guards stood ready to take her to the dark, isolated room.

Once alone in her dark prison, El had been able to compose her thoughts about this new girl, Max. She was horrified that *another* person like her was trapped in this terrible place. To see another person's light snuffed out by the harsh hand of this facility was a devastating thought.

But secretly, and with immense guilt, El was glad to have another friend. She felt the small flicker of hope that maybe, just maybe, Max was telling the truth. Maybe, she would find a way out. Maybe Max would help take her and Will away from this place forever. Maybe she would eventually have a shot at finding "friends" and "loved ones" in the real world.

Hundreds of miles away, sleeping peacefully in his bed, sixteen year old Mike Wheeler remained blissfully unaware of the danger his future friends were facing.

Notes for the Chapter:

Hello from future me writing this after I published the final chapter! My writing gets stronger as the story goes on, so I encourage you to stick with this story if you're feelin' it!

you can find me on tumblr @janes-mike if you wanna chat!

-AJ

2. The Lost Brother

Time had come to a stop for El as she lay shivering on her bed. Her small arms wrapped tightly around her legs as she curled into a ball trying to stay warm.

Days had passed since the last mission, and El had not been let out of her room since then. Food had been delivered, medications brought on a tray, but there had been no one to demand she come with them, no one to tell her what to do.

Each day that she was trapped alone dragged on for what felt like hours. Boredom seeped through her skin and left her to her own mind, going over the rambling words Max had said before they left the Void on their last mission.

“I think I just-I don’t know for sure-but I think I might’ve just found a way out. I have to look back at it all and I don’t know really if this would work-but then again how could it not? You know what no, there’s no way this would-well maybe this is actually the only way, well I don’t know for sure but it might just work.”

Thoughts and theories pounded at El’s brain as she tried to guess exactly what Max had seen while on the mission.

She turned over on her side, rubbing her goosebump laden arms and shifting uncomfortably.

What did you find, Max? The location she herself had been sent out to confirm had only been a small room containing lots of machines and papers. She thought they might have been the “computers” that were spoken of so often, but looking back she wasn’t so sure.

I wish I could go check again. El wrestled with the temptation to enter the Void on her own and see for herself what was going on, but she knew full well that she was being closely monitored by the security cameras in her room. Besides, she didn’t understand technology and couldn’t manipulate it the way Max could. She would just have to wait until she was brought to see Max again.

El rolled onto her back and winced, the fresh bruise on her shoulder blade throbbing. One particularly nasty guard had shoved her hard into her room the day before, causing her back to collide roughly with the wall. She closed her soft eyes gently, trying desperately to fall asleep, but she knew it was no use. She had so many questions and no one to answer them.

Out of sheer boredom, the pain in her shoulder fresh in her mind, El envisioned life outside the walls of the facility. Will had shown her images of the life he had led before being captured several times when they were alone, and El was enraptured by each one.

Will's home, warm and inviting with pillows and family pictures lining the walls. The sun shining in through the windows and a dog sleeping steadily on the kitchen floor.

His parents, his Joyce and Jim Hopper, sitting lovingly on a couch together, Joyce's head on Jim's shoulder, Jim's arm wrapped around her.

Will's brother Jonathan, seated next to him in his car listening to music on the radio together, driving to nowhere in particular.

An "arcade" as Will had called it, packed tightly with other kids her age. Glowing scoreboards and games filled her mind as she softly smiled to herself, imagining what it would feel like to *be there*.

Just as she was beginning to drift off to sleep, El's breath hitched in her throat as she was brought sharply out her daydreaming by a blaring siren screaming throughout the room.

Her eyes darted around in confusion. Rising quickly from her bed, El could barely feel the ice cold of the floor beneath her bare feet as the sirens screeched on. She threw her head to the ceiling as the lights above her started flickering frantically before shutting off completely. The siren cut out quickly as well.

El could feel her heart thumping wildly in her chest. *What is going on?*

As she glanced around the room, something strange caught her eye. Eyes squinting through the darkness, El shuffled slowly to her left,

pressing herself to the very corner of the room. The security cameras, usually so dutifully following her every movement, seemed stuck. The red light that blinked through the day and night was gone.

They were off. The security cameras were off. El ran a hand through her short, stubby hair, fingers shaking a bit as the realization dawned on her. *Max*.

Whatever Max's plan was, this was it.

As if on cue, the door to El's room burst open, slamming into the adjacent wall. Her heart hammering wildly in her chest, El pressed herself as close to the wall as she could get and squeezed her eyes shut, trying to remain out of sight.

Two figures ran inside, one limping. They seemed to be scouring the room in the dark. El could only barely make out the hospital gowns in the dim lighting. Her stomach dropped and she took a cautious step forward, breaths going in and out at an extremely rapid pace.

"...Max? ...Will?" She whispered through the darkness. They whipped around in the direction of her voice and rushed forward, grabbing onto El's arms despite her initial flinch.

Max's hasty voice cut through the room. "El, I don't have time to explain, but we're getting out of here. I need you to be ready to use your powers, okay? That's the only way this is going to work."

El's brown eyes were wide and jumped from Max to Will anxiously. Her adrenaline was rushing, but even so she dreaded what was to come. She really didn't like using her powers to go to the Void, but more than that she *hated* using her additional powers to move things, to hurt things, to hurt people.

Nevertheless, she nodded her head vigorously and in a flash, Will and Max were pulling her out of the room.

The hallway was clear of guards, the darkness of the corridor sending eerie and sinister feelings down El's spine. The three teenagers held tightly to each other's hands as they rushed through the facility.

Max pulled El and Will through the maze of hallways, never stopping

once. El focused on the sound of their heavy breathing mixed with the smacking of their feet against the tile in order to distract herself from the blinding panic pushing at the forefront of her mind.

As they turned a corner, relief flooded El's system as she saw a set of stairs behind a pair of swinging doors. She increased her pace a bit, breathing hard, expecting them to make a run for it up the stairs, but Max suddenly yanked Will and El back, her windswept red hair fanning around her. They slid to a stop in front of a closed door, hands on their knees and breathing heavily. Will leaned against the wall, wincing and gripping his ankle tightly.

Max didn't seem to notice, and instead gestured to the door, "El... I need... you to unlock... the door," she gasped out between gulps of air. Her slight frame was hunched towards the doorknob.

El didn't question this, instead reaching for her powers deep within her and focusing on the lock itself. With a click, it had opened and Max pushed her way inside, slamming the door into the wall in her haste. She turned back around and faced the two urgently, her icy blue eyes wide and wild.

"I need to get some things before we go. El, you gotta keep those doors shut for now, just in case any guards come from upstairs," she pointed towards the swinging doors leading to the stairwell. El swiveled her head back around and nodded quickly. She lifted her hands slightly at her sides and reached deep down, forcing the doors to remain shut, her power pulsing through her like sound waves.

Max quickly spun back around and darted deeper into the room. From the corner of her eye, El could see the blue charges of electricity sparking around the area in which Max stood. El's eyes widened as she realized Max was turning on the computers in the room, bringing them back to life using only her mind.

Minutes ticked by, each second sending more waves of panic and terror through her. Every sound, every movement, every click of Max's keyboard flared El's anxiety past the breaking point. The adrenaline pulsing through her veins kept her rooted in her spot, however, determined to keep those doors closed no matter what. She saw the elevator next to the stairwell and felt a lurch of panic as she

thought someone might just use that instead of the stairs. *Wait, powers out. Okay.*

El glanced over at Will to see him trembling in his spot on the wall, hands shaking nervously. Just as she was about to say something in order to comfort him, the loud thumps of a dozen footsteps echoed through the hall. El and Will faced each other in sheer terror, goosebumps spreading up and down their arms.

Will peered into the room, holding onto the doorframe, “M-Max, they’re coming!” He clamored hastily.

“Fuck, shit, I only need one more minute, it’s almost done printing,” she called back, her voice shaking slightly.

The footsteps drew closer, El’s heart beating five times for each second that passed. She could barely detect the nosebleed that had started.

Will pushed himself off the wall and turned to face El, his eyes set and determined, “I’m going to go distract them, stay here with Max. I’ll be back in a minute.”

Before she could argue or say anything, he had taken off down the hall, limping slightly on his bad leg. El spun her head around quickly, “Will, no! Will, come back!” It was too late however, she couldn’t see him anymore.

A few tense moments passed in slow motion. The silence of the hall disturbed only by the mechanical noises coming from the room in which Max was working.

“I got them, I’m done, let’s get out of here-” Max’s rushed out of the room, dozens of papers held tightly in her fists. Her hurried voice was cut off by the sound of shrieks and screams down the corridor.

Several voices were echoing off the walls, panicked shouts of, “Fire!” and, “Help, it’s got me!” rang through the corridor. El and Max shared a knowing look. *Will.* El figured he must have been planting images in the minds of the guards, forcing them to see things they didn’t wish to see in order to distract them.

A vengeful grin was just beginning to form on El's face when the shouts down the hall turned from ones of horror, to ones of realization, "You morons, it's a trick! The fucking brat is just messing with your heads!"

"Shit, now it's *really* time to go." Max uttered under her breath, grabbing onto El's elbow roughly and pulling her in the direction of the elevator next to the stairwell. "WILL!" She hollered backwards, "WILL, LET'S GO!"

Reaching the elevator, Max closed her eyes and pressed her hand up against the door of the machine, breathing deeply. With a flash of blue light and a burst of energy, the lights sparked back up around it and the doors slammed open. The two girls rushed inside, hands clasped tightly, Max holding the stack of papers in her other hand for dear life.

As she turned around, El saw Will busting it around the corner, rushing towards them as fast as his injured leg could carry him. Three guards were following closely behind him, their larger frames and longer strides gave them a dangerously faster pace, enough so that Will was within arms reach.

El's breath caught in her throat and without a moment's hesitation, without pausing to think whatsoever, she reached a hand up and thrust her powers through the air, knocking the three guards straight into the wall behind to them. A sickening *crunch* echoed through the hall as the three lay motionless on the ground.

El felt her energy draining quickly, her eyes growing heavy as she lost her balance and fell against the back elevator wall with a thud.

Stars dancing in her vision, she opened her eyes enough to see Will rushing to them, only a few meters to the elevator door. Though her hearing was muffled and her attention was waning, she could make out Max screaming for Will to hurry up.

The next few seconds would replay in El's mind for years to come.

As Will neared closer to the elevator, two guards turned from around the corner. Dressed in all black, their silhouettes outlined against the

pale white walls, they emerged like angels of death. In their hands were heavy, deadly weapons. Aiming with precision, the guards pointed their guns in the teenagers' directions.

Time slowed to a stop as shots rang out, and El froze in terror as she watched Will's eyes shining with horror as he suddenly jerked, before dropping to the floor like a puppet whose strings had been cut. El's eyes widened in horror and her breathing stopped completely.

Someone was screaming, shrieking, hollering. It took a second for El to realize it was a mix of both her and Max.

For a split second, neither of them knew what to do. Will had collapsed motionless on the ground, blood beginning to ooze out from under him. He was gone. Dead. Unmoving. They would be gone too if they didn't do something fast. Both paralyzed in fear and fright, Max acted first. Blue shockwaves rippled through the elevator as she slammed the doors shut, shooting the machine up, up, up, to the ground floor.

They had only a few seconds in the elevator to process what had just happened. The image of Will's unmoving body piercing their minds.

Gone. Gone. Gone.

Her first friend, one of the only people in the world to show her kindness and compassion, the first person to show her the world beyond the confines of the hellish facility, was gone. Forever. She hadn't been fast enough.

El's mouth remained gaping at the now closed doors, eyebrows drawn up in shock. She couldn't move, couldn't speak, couldn't process what was happening.

Sooner than they'd have liked, the elevator doors opened with a bang, and the girls peeked out at the seemingly empty lobby of the facility in which they had been imprisoned for years. Her small frame shaking terribly, El carefully rose to her feet. Her mouth hung open in shock and she could feel tears sliding down her face, though she couldn't recall when she'd started crying.

Max looked back at her, horror written on every inch of her face. Holding a hand out, the girls clasped hands and held onto each other for dear life, sprinting out of the elevator and through the lobby, slamming the main front doors open.

Hearts pounding, eyes burning, they ran as fast as they could across the cement of the parking lot and to the grassy area where a service gate seemed to be located.

In the back of El's mind, she realized this was her first *real* time outside. At least, her first time experiencing the outside world without being closely monitored by guards. This thought came and went in a flash however, as the reality of the situation shot through her mind once more.

Using the last bout of powers she had left, El focused her mind and broke the gate open. The metal fencing crunched and screamed as she tore it apart, leaving a hole just big enough for the two of them to squeeze through.

Without so much as a glance back to the prison in which she'd been kept for sixteen years, El pushed on forward. She urged her legs to move faster, to take her as far away from that *place* as she could get.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you for all the support! Let me know what you think :)

3. On The Run: Part One

“I think...it’s about...a half a mile....up that way,” Max panted, voice cutting through the cold air over the sound of their heavy breathing. Both girls had pressed themselves up against large trees, the rough bark digging into the skin that was left exposed from the hospital gowns. Neither of them seemed to notice or care, as adrenaline was still shooting through their bodies.

They’d been running through a dense wooded area for what felt like hours, legs aching and lungs burning with stitches. Max led the way, eyes wild yet determined. She had been clutching the stack of papers tightly in her fist, as if her life depended on it.

El didn’t know for sure, as she still wasn’t clued in on whatever Max’s grand plan was, but she knew those papers were important. Important enough that they had to stop and take the time to print them out. Time that could’ve been spent escaping. *Time that could’ve saved Will.*

They also didn’t seem to be running aimlessly. No, Max had a destination in mind, a place that they were headed to. El just didn’t know *where* .

After what seemed like forever, Max had slowed to a stop, bracing herself with her free hand against a massive tree. El collapsed on the ground next to her, scraping her knees on the roots as she went down but not caring in the slightest. They rested in silence for a few minutes, their laborious breathing the only thing keeping the two girls rooted in reality in the dark forest.

Gone. Gone. Gone.

Will’s bleeding, unmoving body was plastered up against El’s mind, refusing to move.

Pushing her haunting thoughts away, body shaking tremendously, El reached a small hand up to take hold of Max’s ankle, beckoning her to sit down too. Max nodded stiffly before slumping down against the tree, tightly pressing the papers against her chest. El’s mouth opened

and closed a few times in an attempt to say something, anything helpful, but she knew they were both thinking the same thing.

After a long moment, Max's resolute whisper cut through the cold air, "We've gotta keep going. We're almost there." Her breath came out in small white clouds.

They had a good head start on the guards, but it didn't escape them for a moment that they needed to keep moving or else...well neither of them wanted to think about what would happen if they were caught.

El groaned, exhaustion seeping through her skin, begging her to stay on the ground. She honestly didn't know if she *could* keep going. She was not accustomed to this much movement and exercise. That put together with the weakness of her underfed body left El feeling closer to passing out than anything else.

Nevertheless, they had to keep going. She knew that. There was no negotiating, no arguing at this point.

Stars danced in her vision as she slowly pushed herself up by her hands, wobbling on the spot as her legs threatened to give away. She put a hand against the solid tree in order to stay upright, blood rushing from her head to her feet.

"I can't...Max...how much more?" El gasped out, tears burning her eyes.

"It's just a little more I promise, I-I know where we're going, I have a plan. We just have to get there." Max pleaded with El, who flinched as the redhead gently put an encouraging hand on her back.

At that moment, rays of a dozen flashlights bounced off the tree trunks around them. They were coming.

"Shit! Shit, shit, shit, let's go!" Max cursed, pulling El by the arm and taking off once more. El didn't need any persuasion, following right behind her.

They ran as fast as their beat down legs could carry them, dashing around shrubs and over fallen tree trunks.

El's eyes burned as they went. *Keep going. Keep going. Keep going.*

A few minutes later, the two burst through a clearing in the trees. Though the dim lighting of the forest edge made it hard to see, a small town seemed to be in the distance, a few glowing lights shining like beacons of hope for the two girls.

They stepped onto the gravel road and took off in the direction of the town, not daring to glance back to see if the flashlights were still following them. The rocks under her bare feet were less harsh than the sharp branches and spiky leaves of the woods, but El could still sense that her feet were being cut up against the gravel.

Nearing closer to the edge of the town, El glanced desperately at Max, who was slowing down as they approached a line of parked cars in front of a building lit up with a glowing neon sign advertising "TWIN OAKS BAR". El heard the grumbling sounds of music and conversation within the building and suddenly felt fearful. *Bad, bad, bad.*

Luckily, it didn't seem like Max had any interest in going inside. Instead, Max was searching the insides of each car quickly and carefully. She shut her eyes and ran a hand against a small silver car, then a blue van, and finally a black truck.

The truck seemed to do the trick for Max because without saying a word, she turned around and thrust the papers into El's grip, smashing both of her palms against the front of the truck. Blue sparks electrified the night as she used her powers to bring the engine to life, startling El and causing her to jump back a few inches.

With a satisfied, "Yes!", Max spun from her spot, facing El and breathing deeply. "Alright, let's get the FUCK out of here!" She rushed to the side of the car and thrust the door open, gesturing for El to climb in.

El's eyes were wide with fright as she stared up at the truck. She'd never been in a car before, she had no idea what to expect.

Nevertheless, there was no time to be afraid. Smiling slowly, she forced her shaking legs up into the truck's interior, scooting all the

way over and settling herself in the passenger seat. Max jumped in right next to her and slammed the door shut before reversing the car quickly and accelerating down the road, away from the town, away from the people, away from any and all signs of life.

El awoke with a jerk, her eyes blaring open before sitting up abruptly. For a moment, she couldn't remember where she was or what was happening. Her heart beat roughly in her chest as she took in her surroundings, eyes darting around hastily.

A glance to her left showed Max slumped a bit in her seat, hands guiding the steering wheel and eyes gazing unfocused at the now sunrise-lit road ahead before looking over to El.

Oh, right. Car. Escape.

El's feet stung tremendously, and a quick look showed deep cuts and scratches painfully designing the bottoms of each foot.

"What happened?" El asked Max cautiously. Max gripped the steering wheel and sat up straighter.

"You passed out a few minutes after we started driving, I guess you were pretty drained. Here, take this," Max rummaged around in the glovebox before pulling out a tissue and passing it to El. She quickly brought a hand up to her nose and found there was dried, cracked blood pooling on her lip. El flushed before taking the tissue gratefully.

"Thanks, I think I was using my powers...to keep going. Not good. Tired."

"Yeah, me too. We're going to stop soon, I just want to get as fucking far away as possible, for now." Max sighed heavily while El gazed around the truck.

"So...this is a car." She didn't know if she liked it, a queasy feeling settling in her stomach as she peeked out the window at the fast moving scenery. They were going so fast, too fast, El knew they would crash for sure. Max seemed unphased, however, a dazed

expression painted on her face.

Looking deeply at Max for the first time since their escape, El could see rough, dark circles under her eyes, like she hadn't slept in days. Max's pale skin seemed almost transparent in the soft orange glow of the sunrise. Her hospital gown was torn at the shoulder, exposing a shallow set of scratches moving up and down her arm. Her long crimson hair, normally so sleek and wavy, lay on her back in tangles.

"Yep. This is a car. A nice car too, it's kinda like the truck my foster dad used to have. Before...well, before everything." A long pause passed as Max seemed stuck in her own mind, eyes staring ahead. "Did you know he taught me how to drive? Back when I was like, fucking twelve years old. He took me out to an empty parking lot and just...just gave me the keys." El smiled as she pictured a younger Max eagerly learning how to drive. The gentle bumps of the road were becoming less nauseating for El, who settled deeper into her seat.

Max chuckled to herself before continuing, "God I was horrible. I went so fucking fast, I just *slammed* my foot on the accelerator and took off. It scared the shit out of my foster dad, but he couldn't stop laughing. Called me Zoomer from then on." Max smiled softly to herself and El felt like she was intruding on a private, personal moment for the redhead.

They sat quietly together as the sun rose higher in the sky. El contentedly stared out the window, finally seeing the world for the first time without supervision.

She decided it was beautiful, and that she loved it. The rays of sunshine kissed the skin of her face and closely-shaved scalp, warming her up gently as they drove along. Trees of emerald green and soft yellow danced along the road, looming protectively over their car. Fluffy clouds lay scattered across the faint blue sky in shapeless masses. El had never seen *anything* like it. Sometimes, she had been allowed picture books in the facility, as Brenner had decided she needed to be educated enough to recognize the world, but she was rarely let outside.

A look over to Max and El saw that she too was enjoying the warmth of the sun on her skin. A lurch of pain and sadness wrenched through

El's body as she thought of Will. Of how he'd never see this for himself ever again. Of how he was gone.

A thousand questions teetered on the tip of her tongue, but she could only manage the one for now.

"Max...what happened?" El didn't need to say anything further, Max understood.

She inhaled deeply before launching into her explanation.

"It started a few days ago, when we were doing the last mission. Do remember the location you were sent out to find?"

El nodded quickly. "Computers and machines and things."

"Yeah, so they had briefed me before I went in. Telling me to find specific files in the databases that were in relation to an Indiana laboratory called the Department of Energy. They *also* told me to not to look at any of it, to just absorb it all and transfer it once we got back to the facility. I didn't think anything of it, because that's the kind of stuff I was usually sent in to get. Information on where organizations were located, what type of security they had, just basic overviews of facilities, you know?"

El didn't know, but she didn't want to stop and ask.

"Anyways, I was using my powers and everything to hack into the databases, when it struck me that they had *never* specifically told me not to look at anything before that. Most times, it seemed like they didn't really care all that much, probably because they knew I couldn't do anything with what I found. But this time they were fervent at making me stay away from this stuff. So, naturally, I started reading through all of the data." Max said this as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. El chuckled to herself.

"It took me a second to realize what it was I was looking at, because at first I didn't recognize it at all. There were basic floor plans, security schedules, employee data files, surrounding town information, the works. It wasn't until I recognized Brenner's name on the employee list that it clicked. It wasn't some random facility, it

was *our* fucking facility. It was every bit of data someone else had on our own little prison.”

El’s eyes widened as she began to put the pieces together.

“It took me a grand total of three seconds to start making an escape plan in my head. After all, now I could see the full picture, the entire scope of the place. I quickly started making a personal copy of everything I saw to store in my head because- well, it’s hard to explain. Basically, immediately after they send me in to extract data, the information just...sits there, heavy in my head until they have me download it onto a computer where they can see it. Once I put the data somewhere else, I don’t have it any more. So I had to take the time to make my own copy. That way I wouldn’t forget anything.”

El’s eyes narrowed, only halfway understanding. She nodded encouragingly anyways.

“I spent the next few nights formulating a plan in my head. I cross-examined security guard schedules, stairwells and exit routes, the town outside the facility. I figured out a way to short-circuit the entire power system using one of the cameras in my room, blacking out all the electricity. I wanted to tell you guys what the plan was, but there wasn’t any way for me to contact you.”

Max spoke feverishly, expelling everything she’d been dying to tell El for days.

“I decided the element of surprise was best. Last night, after the guards switched to the night shift, I just went for it. I got Will out of his room first, and then we went to find you.”

El nodded, remembering the blaring alarms followed by the echoing silence.

“It was the perfect plan. Fool-proof. There was only one thing that could’ve gone wrong...and it did.”

Max sighed before reaching behind her to grab the stack of papers placed on the back seat. She handed them over to El, who grasped them gently before taking a look.

El's reading abilities weren't great, but she could recognize the small, easy words and numbers.

Flipping through several of the papers, she saw unfamiliar words like SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER, and BANKING DATA. She didn't know what these meant, but they must've been important.

The final three papers had pictures fastened to them with paper clips. El shuffled curiously to these pages, eager to know what Max had been so desperate to get. In big block letters, written clearly across the top of one of the papers, read:

JANE IVES

Current age: sixteen

Birth date: 15 January

Parents/Guardians: deceased

Subject number: 011

Status: alive and in containment

El glanced confusedly to Max, who was frowning at the road. There was a picture of a younger El attached to this page. She was shyly looking away, confusion evident in her eyes. *What does this mean? Jane Ives?*

She flipped to the next page, which held a more recent picture of Max, glaring into the camera.

MAXINE MAYFIELD

Current age: seventeen

Birth date: 18 February

Parents/Guardians: deceased

Subject number: 013

Status: alive and in containment

Deceased? This word was new.

Finally, she switched to the last page.

El's breath caught sharply in her throat as Will's soft face stared up at her. It looked like it was taken right when he'd arrived. His hair was buzzed closely, and his face didn't reflect how he'd aged over the years. Tears pooled in El's eyes, blurring her vision.

WILLIAM BYERS

Current age: sixteen

Birth date: 22 March

Parents/Guardians: under surveillance

Subject number: 012

Status: alive and in containment

Alive and in containment. That was not true anymore.

El flipped the pages back together, swiping fiercely at the tears that threatened to spill over. Max continued to speak.

"I knew we needed personal information before we left, or else we'd have no shot in the real world. That room I made us stop at, it had everything we needed. I got it all, brand new social security cards, forged birth certificates, false passports, a printed bank routing number with disposable money, everything. But the fancy goddamn printer took too long. If I'd been...if I'd been faster, then Will...Will would've...he would still--"

El's stomach dropped as she sputtered and choked.

Max abruptly veered the car to the side of the deserted road before dropping her forehead onto the steering wheel, sobbing roughly.

El's tears finally gave way, as she wrapped her frail arms around her legs, tucking them to her chest. The two girls sat there together, an ocean of emotions passing between the two without the need for

words. Their grief echoed through the car, the sadness and the longing to change what had happened pressing down hard on their shoulders.

“Th-this is my fault. Will’s fucking d-dead b-because of me. H-he’s just *gone* . Forever.” Max’s sobs cut through the air.

El hiccuped and brought a shaking hand up against Max’s back. *No*.

“No, Max. No. It was not...your fault. No. You didn’t...you didn’t shoot him. No. Not your fault.” El’s voice wavered from her tears as she tried to sound determined.

The car’s silence was only disturbed by the sniffles and stuttered breaths from both girls as they tried to get ahold of themselves.

After a few heavy moments, Max lifted her head off the steering wheel and pulled the car back onto the road, still sniffing.

El kept her arms wrapped around her legs. The thin material of her torn hospital gown provided little comfort, but the heat from the sun was warming her enough.

“So, what happens now?” El’s small voice questioned. Max turned her head for a moment before looking back at the road.

“Now...now we’re out. Those documents I stole have fake names and forged identities, which we’ll need to use.”

Max paused, collecting herself. She ran a hand through her tangled hair before slapping it back down onto the steering wheel.

“We can’t be us anymore. We can’t tell anyone who we are, or what we can do. Now...now we move on with our lives.”

El stared at her hands, thinking deeply. *Move on?*

Fear pooled in her stomach as she realized everything in her life was changing. She had no idea what to expect, how to act, what to do in the real world. El didn’t think she was ready, but then again, she didn’t have much of a choice.

El glanced up from her hands, eyes settling in panicked determination. She nodded to herself before speaking resolutely, “Okay. Move on.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you all so much for your support!! This is my first time writing anything really, so your encouragement means a lot!! I hope you like this chapter! Time jump coming up next!

4. A Coffee Shop

She was only *just* starting to think she had brought too many books when she left the apartment that cool, fall morning. The hefty bag weighed her shoulder down significantly, but she knew she was justified in her picks. One book for the train, one for the coffee shop, and one for her break. It was a delicate and finite system that she just had to stick to.

The crisp autumn air nipped at her soft skin as she shuffled along the cobblestone sidewalk. Keeping her beanie tucked closely over the wavy chocolate-colored hair covering her chilly ears, El smiled to herself and made her way closer to the train station.

Max hated walking in the morning, always preferring to drive, even more so preferring to sleep in. She was especially vocal about this when the weather called for the brisk morning air currently blustering around outside.

El, however, couldn't get enough of it. She loved the wind on her face, the dewy haze of the morning fog, the pale orange hue of the rising sun. She loved getting dressed each morning in whatever it was she wanted to wear that day. She loved riding the bumpy train and losing herself in books. She looked forward to each and every morning, trying not to let herself feel too greedy or selfish for having so much in her life.

El pulled her big lumpy sweater tighter around her front, the cold air sending a chill down her spine.

Upon seeing her outfit for the day, Max had snarked that El looked like an overgrown kindergartener. El had glanced down at her short overalls, black tights, and sneakers, and silently agreed.

"Yeah, that's my look." She'd quipped back with a smirk, making Max laugh so hard she spit out the juice she'd been drinking. El hoped that by throwing on a cozy navy blue sweater and a hat, she would look closer to her actual age.

Making her way onto the train, El found her usual corner seat by the

window and settled down before tearing into her book.

In the five years since their daring escape, El's education level had progressed dramatically. She was exceptionally bright considering her upbringing, and Max proved to be a decent teacher. Using library books, online programs, and cheap workbooks, Max had slowly but surely brought El up to a high school reading level, of which they were both very proud.

Math and science weren't her strong suits, however, but as Max declared, "You don't need any of that crap anyways. I don't remember half the shit we learned about in school."

No, she wasn't great at the science and math stuff, and Max was right, she didn't really need it in her day-to-day life. Reading on the other hand, reading was a whole other story.

El loved to read more than anything else in this new world. She loved new stories and old stories, books about real things and pretend things. She loved adventures and tall tales, she loved romance and friendships. But most of all, she loved the idea that she could escape her own thoughts, her own depressing struggles and live in the shoes of someone else for a while. It was not only appealing and inviting, it was enchanting.

When her intrusive thoughts were too much, when her guilt over Will, and her fear of being taken again invaded every inch of her mind, she would simply get lost in someone else's story.

Max had once called her vivacious reading an, "escapist coping mechanism, one you'll have to face one day." El had selectively ignored her, conveniently forgetting to look up the tricky words.

The train ride flashed by quicker than El would've liked, and before she knew it she was following her familiar route to the center of the city.

All around her, people in suits and scrubs and dresses milled about,

tiredly making their ways to do whatever it was they did. The hustle of people scrambling on sidewalks and in cars and off trains gave El a calming sort of anonymity. It was like no one could see her, judge her, recognize her.

Her lips pressed together tightly from the chill as she neared closer to her newfound favorite destination: A Coffee Shop.

The name was what drew her in the first place. It was so tongue-in-cheek and lazily clever that she'd had half a mind to ask Max if she'd made it up, as it was exactly her sense of dry humor.

Settled quaintly in between an antique shop and a consignment store on the corner of the street, it was easy to walk past this secret gem. From the outside, it was nothing special, two large windows, a wooden sign at the top of the door expressing to it's customers to, "*Come on in!*"

From the moment she'd walked in a few weeks ago, however, El knew this was her place. Fluffy couches with pillows of every color lined the sides of the shop, booths were set up snug next to the big open windows, with tables and chairs with swirly designs taking up the center. Old movie posters and vinyl album covers hung on the walls, twinkling lights providing a cozy ambiance. Barstools were pressed up against the thick wooden counter, where El frequently saw people conversing with the staff.

She loved the charm of it all. Being in A Coffee Shop gave her a sense of familiarity, it gave her the feeling that time had just...stopped for a while.

That and they made damn good coffee.

On this particularly cold September morning, as she entered the mostly-empty shop, El was absolutely *craving* a steaming hot white mocha. She shuffled over to her usual corner booth before setting her hefty bag down and digging around for some money. Pulling her sweater sleeves over her hands, El shyly made her way over to the counter, keeping her head down.

One hot white mocha with a half-pump less sweetener, please.

One hot white mocha with a half-pump less sweetener, please.

One hot white mocha with a half-pump less sweetener, please.

Ordering was the worst part. Practicing in her head made it a little bit easier, as long as the person working stuck to the script and wasn't too chatty.

Once her turn was up, El budged forward, facing the guy ready to take her order.

Upon seeing her, a lopsided grin broke out on his smiling face, his bouncy, curly hair sticking up from under his hat.

"Heyyy! It's you again! El, right? White mocha with half-sweetener?" El's eyes widened, her words stuck as she stared at the boy. His gentle eyes and kind smile made her feel less threatened, but nevertheless, she put her guard up. Nodding quickly, a bit taken aback, she glanced quickly at his nametag: DUSTIN H.

Do I know him? How does he know me? Do I really come here that much?

Dustin turned towards the back, behind the main counter and to the kitchen. "Hey, Lucas! Take a break from frosting the damn cookies and make me a white mocha, half sweetener!"

"Why can't you make it? I'm busy creating *masterpieces* !" A voice answered back.

"Because I'm taking orders and doing things that actually *matter* !"

"Oh, and these cookies don't matter? You know as well as I do it's the only thing keeping the customers wanting more!"

"Noooo, it's MY boyish charm and excellent personal skills that keep the customers wanting more!"

An enormous groan sounded from the back.

"Oh do not EVEN get me started on your *boyish charm* . Just because you're peppy and ready for the day at six a.m. doesn't mean you have boyish charm!"

El listened to this exchange with rapt attention, her mouth twitching up as the responses got more ridiculous.

“I beeeeeeg to differ! There’s a reason I’m up here at the front and you’re on cookie duty today!”

“Yeah, the reason being that Mike’s been back home and isn’t here to kick you back to cookie duty with me!”

“Oh well you know what, I bet if I called RIGHT NOW and asked, he’d probably agree with *me* . Boyish charm, all the way!”

“Oh my god Dustin, you’re such an idiot. Give me like HALF A SECOND and I’ll be done frosting these MASTERPIECES.”

Dustin swiveled back around to face her, “He’ll be ready in a minute. Can I get you anything else while you wait, El?” Her smile waned as she sputtered timidly for a beat, mind still reeling from their insane banter. Her mouth dropped open and closed as she tried to find the words.

“Uh, no thank you, just the uh...just the coffee.” She handed Dustin the money before furrowing her eyebrows. “How do you, um, how do you know me?” Wringing her hands together, she winced as her words sounded less casual and more accusational than she intended. This was important though, for safety reasons she needed to know.

Dustin didn’t seem phased, however, simply grinning back before responding, “You’ve been coming in like four days a week for the past two weeks reading in that corner seat. I’ve probably called out ‘white mocha for El’ a dozen times.” She raised her eyebrows in surprise. “Nice name by the way, what’s it short for?”

She bit back her words as the immediate and only true answer nearly rolled off her tongue.

“Oh, um, Eleanor. That’s why it’s got, you know, just the E and the L.” She drew out the letters in the air with her finger, not sure why she was answering at all. She had never been talked to so animatedly before, with the exception of Max. It was like Dustin and her were best friends reuniting and catching up. El couldn’t tell if she liked it

so far. She definitely didn't *hate* it, as she wanted to keep talking to the boy, but the unease in her stomach told her to stay on her guard.

He handed her back a few coins in change before continuing on.

"Neat! Well I'm Dustin, as you could probably tell." He poked his nametag. "And the frosting aficionado back there is Lucas." As he spoke, a tall chocolate-skinned boy emerged from the back, wiping his hands on the bottom of his apron.

"What about Lucas?" He questioned coming closer to the counter.

"Lucas, you know El? Sits in the corner to read a few times a week?" Dustin quipped.

"Yeahhh," he drew out, "Nice to meet you properly El, I'm Lucas, the brains behind this operation." He declared proudly as he held a hand to his chest modestly. Dustin was quick to respond.

"If you're the brains, I'm the brawns, right?" El bit back a laugh and swept her long hair back as Lucas shot Dustin a massive eye roll.

Before either of them could start another argument, El pushed her way into the conversation, "It's nice to meet you both. Properly." She grinned, "I didn't know I was such a fixture of this place. I like it here, you guys make good coffee."

Dustin and Lucas both smiled at her proudly, before each started insisting it was *all them*. She laughed along with their bickering as the morning went on, slowly letting her guard down and allowing herself to input and have fun with the conversation.

It took about a half-hour before she actually got the coffee she paid for, as both boys kept getting distracted amongst the conversation and the slow flow of customers.

El quickly learned that Dustin and Lucas were both enrolled at the nearby university, and lived together with their other friend, Mike, who was out of town for the break. They had all apparently known each other since they were very young, but had really only bonded once they hit high school. The two boys spoke very quickly, almost as if they knew what the other was going to say, before they said it. El

felt like her brain was running a million miles a minute trying to keep up with their ribbing.

When asked about her own life, El remained as private as she could without shutting them down completely.

“Well, I live with my best friend Max. Uh, we just moved to town a few months ago, so we’re still pretty new to the area.” She’d pieced together slowly, adjusting her beanie nervously.

“Oh cool! Well we know lots of places around here to have fun. What does Max do? Or what’s his major if he’s in school?”

“SHE’S working at a technology institute around here. I’m..uh...not sure what it’s called or anything, but she seems to really like it.” This was a half-truth. Yes, Max was going to a technology institute every day, but not because she worked there.

“Ooh, I bet it’s Intex, a guy in my programming class just scored an internship there.” Lucas responded excitedly, wiping the counter down as he spoke. “What about you, El?”

“Me?” She’d questioned with furrowed brows.

“Yeah, what do you get up to when we’re not here talking your ear off?” Dustin smiled.

El leaned forward on the counter, twirling her cup between her hands, “I work part time at the bookstore down the street. You know, organizing, filing, that kind of stuff.” Why was she telling them any of this? How did she trust them so much already? *Maybe it’s their boyish charm*, she thought cleverly to herself.

Dustin and Lucas grunted in acceptance, that latter speaking up, “That makes sense, you seem pretty bookish.” A beat passed. “Not that that’s a bad thing!” He quickly backtracked as Dustin smacked him on the arm.

El chuckled and sat up before retorting, “It’s okay, not all people are book people.”

Lucas nodded, smacking Dustin’s shoulder in revenge as he walked

past, leaving to bus a newly empty table. “You should talk to Mike, he reads probably just as much as you, maybe even more.”

El patted her bag, which she’d retrieved once she realized the conversation wasn’t stopping anytime soon, “I don’t know, I’ve got three in here just for today.”

Lucas’s eyes widened as he stared at the bag.

Just then, a loud *SMASH* echoed through the shop.

El flinched harshly at the noise, jerking around and jumping off her barstool, heart pounding wildly. Her head darted around, ready to flee in case it was an attack, when she realized it was only Dustin who had dropped the bucket containing the empty mugs and plates.

El brought her shaking hands up to pull her lumpy sweater closer over her overalls, breathing fast as she pushed herself back up into her seat.

Spinning back around, she glanced up at Lucas, whose eyebrows were drawn together in curiosity, “You all right?”

She stared blankly at him for a moment, trying to settle the queasy feeling in her stomach. Pulling her sweater back over her hands, she nodded, “Yeah...yeah I’m fine.” It was entirely unconvincing, and she could hear Max’s bossy voice yelling, “BullSHIT!” in her head, but if Lucas noticed anything odd, he didn’t mention it.

Despite the interruption, the conversation continued on without another hitch.

She decided that morning, sitting on the barstools, sipping her piping hot drink and grinning at their banter, that she liked the two boys from A Coffee Shop. Enough so that she forgot about escaping into her books for a little while. She forgot about her past, her scars and her trauma. She forgot about the mistakes that caused the death of her first friend.

That morning, sitting on the barstools, she felt more normal than ever before in her life.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you guys SO SO SO much for all your comments and everything!! They really light up my day!

5. In Wonderland

As soon as he stepped foot in the place, Mike decided he was NEVER letting Dustin and Lucas alone in the coffee shop again. Granted, they *were* closing soon and no one was there, but nevertheless, trusting those two to hold down the fort while he visited his mom over break was already proving to be a grave error.

Standing slack jawed in the doorframe, Mike stared out in astonishment at what looked like an indoor, man-made hockey game.

Tables and chairs stood stacked up against opposing walls, the couches typically framing the entryway creating boundary lines running up and down the shop. A small plastic plate he recognized from the back room sat in the middle of the area.

His shocked gaze jumped to his two idiot friends standing shamefully on either side of the room, holding mops.

He didn't even want to know what their apartment looked like.

Dustin spoke up first.

"Hey Mike! Welcome back!" He grinned as if nothing was out of the ordinary. "How's Karen? Anything new going on at home?"

Mike raised his eyebrows, tilting his head forward slightly. *Idiots*. He took a few steps further into the shop, moving around the various obstacles set up in order to put his lumpy bag down on the counter. He sent up a prayer and gathered his strength before turning around to face Dustin and Lucas.

"Um, yeah, my mom's fine. Everything's good at home, you know, Holly's got a part in her school's musical. They're doing *Alice in Wonderland* and she seems really excited about it because she got a big part. Yeah, real cool, oh and uh...what the HELL are you two doing?!" They flinched as his tone ripped through the room.

Dustin and Lucas winced and sent each other a "we fucked up" look, twirling the mops around in their hands.

“Well...cleaning is just so boring, you know!” Dustin pleaded throwing an arm out.

Lucas nodded and held a hand fervently to his chest, “I swear we were doing it like normal while you were gone. But Sundays we’re supposed to mop the floors...and neither of us wanted to do it and no one’s been in for like an hour, so...” He glanced at Dustin for support.

“So...we’re playing Mop Hockey.” The curly-haired boy finished with a grimacing sort of smile.

Mike deadpanned the two, crossing his arms over his chest. He raised his eyebrows as if to say, “anything else?”

Lucas got the message, “We’re still cleaning! We’re mopping the floors as we go! It’s just...we’re having some fun while doing it.” Dustin nodded along insistently.

Mike ambled over to their ‘hockey rink’, glancing down at the floors. They *did* seem pretty clean, no dirt or smudges that he could see.

On one of his better days, Mike might’ve made them quit it and get back to work. On one of his best days, he might’ve even joined them. But he was tired from his flight, his back aching as the leg space was too small for his long limbs. That and he had an errand to run before heading back to their apartment.

He faced his guilty friends once more, debating in his head if he was *really* about to do this.

Relaxing his shoulders and letting his arms drop, Mike huffed and gave in.

“Okay fine. Just...put the couches and tables and stuff back when you’re done. And don’t break anything! Mary will kill me if we break anything else!” Dustin and Lucas grinned at one another, high fiving in the air from across either sides of the room. Even though she was extremely short and stout, Mary, the owner of the shop, still scared the shit out of the boys. None of them had really gotten over the smashed oven incident from the previous year.

“Thanks Mike! We’ll be careful!” Lucas exclaimed, striding back over

to his goal spot. “See you at home later?”

Mike nodded, grabbing his bag and making his way to the door, “Yeah I’m headed home now, just gotta run by that bookstore down the street. Holly’s insistent that I get her a copy of *Alice in Wonderland* now that she’s in the musical version.”

Neither Dustin nor Lucas seemed to be listening, both of them dipping their mops in soapy water and squatting in front of their ‘goals’.

Mike left without another word, feeling it was best to remove himself from the situation before he witnessed any of the inevitable damage liabilities that would *definitely* arise from their Mop Hockey game.

Striding around the corner and down the street, Mike tried to make out the dim signs in each store window. The sky was darkening quickly, and a flash of panic settled in his stomach as he realized the bookstore might not be open this late.

Quickening his pace, Mike was relieved to see lights on in the store as he neared closer. He pulled the door open and stepped inside, the warm air of the place wrapping him up.

Hidden Paradise Bookshop looked like it had been pulled from a movie. Large wooden bookshelves lay in neat rows up and down the store, the surrounding walls stacked high with books, tall ladders leaning against them. Inside the big open window, a small display promoted the newest in fiction to the outside world. Cozy, cushioned chairs were strewn about, inviting anyone to curl up for a while. The smell of unread books, as well as vanilla wafted throughout the room.

Mike took a deep breath, his stress melting away. He closed the door behind him, setting off to find the children’s fiction area.

He’d just turned the corner around a row of historical biographies when he saw her for the first time.

Leaning up against the ladder, books pressed to her front, Mike didn’t think he’d ever seen anyone so beautiful. Her chocolate hair was pulled in a loose bun, wisps falling out and framing her face as she

concentrated. Button nose sloping up at the tip, the girl bit her lip as she focused. The sleeves of her sweater fell to her elbows as she stacked books in their appropriate spots, humming wistfully as she worked.

Mike stared in awe, the world around him melting away.

Holy shit.

The moment ended quickly though, as she finished stacking the books and slowly started stepping down the ladder.

Deciding not to be a total creep, Mike spoke up.

“Uh...hi.” It sounded more like a question than he would’ve liked, but it caught her attention.

She started before spinning around on the ladder, locking eyes with him for the first time.

She saw his eyes before anything else. They were so dark it felt as if she was looking at an endless stretch of midnight sky. There was nothing threatening about them though. On the contrary, despite their inky hue, El had never seen so much light.

His hair flopped over his forehead as he looked up at her from her spot on the ladder. Quickly gathering her bearings, El started making her way down to the ground.

“Hi! Sorry, I didn’t hear you come in. What can I help you with?” She breathed out as she hit the floor, wiping her hands on her dress and pulling her sweater over her fingers as she gazed up at him. He was tall, really tall. Tall enough that she had to crane her head a bit to look him in the eye.

Mike gawked at her for a moment too long, quite literally in awe, before he remembered why he was there in the first place.

“Oh um, I’m looking for a copy of *Alice in Wonderland* . For my little sister!” He added as an afterthought.

Holy shit, get it together Wheeler!

El nodded approvingly at the boy, still a bit lost in his eyes, “I think we’ve got one or two of those lying around. For your sister, of course.” She added firmly, making a show of how serious this fact was. He smiled sweetly at her and she felt butterflies erupt in her stomach.

Leading the way, El walked up the aisle and across the room, to a small corner section holding children’s fiction. She ran a delicate hand across the spines, looking for the right title.

“Here it is! *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll,” She smiled, turning around and handing the book over to the boy. Their fingers brushed during the exchange and both of them felt their hearts skip a beat.

Mike beamed at the girl, “Oh my god, thank you so much, you’re a life-saver. You have no idea, I was back home and all the stores were sold out because everybody else in that stupid musical got the book too, and my baby sister Holly, well she’s not a baby anymore, but she was all upset about it and *begged* me to get her a copy, but I didn’t have enough time and...and I’m rambling.”

His ears turned pink as his face flushed, barely believing that he’d just babbled on about his sister’s musical woes to the prettiest girl he’d ever talked to before. She didn’t seem at all phased, however, grinning up at his embarrassed face.

El laughed as she replied, “It’s okay, I’m glad I could be of service. It’s a great book, she’ll love it.” Her stomach was fluttering a great deal, and she was finding it harder to look him in the eye.

He nodded along, “My mom used to read it to me when I was sick. She would do all the funny voices and she sang some song with it.” *Why are you telling her this, oh my GOD Wheeler.*

“That sounds really nice,” She chuckled back.

They both started making their way to the register, walking in semi-awkward silence for the few paces it took to get there. Both of them were painfully aware of the other’s presence, trying hard not to do anything foolish.

As she was ringing him up, thankful she had something to do with her hands, he decided to take the leap.

“I’m Mike by the way, Mike Wheeler.” He wanted to take it back as soon as he said it. *God, you’re such an idiot, she doesn’t care who you are!*

Her honey eyes met his dark ones as she handed him the book back, lips pulling up in a smile. It took all her composition to remain as calm as one could be with their heart thumping so hard it could probably be heard from a mile away.

“Nice to meet you Mike Wheeler, I’m El...” She paused in panic, trying desperately to remember the last name she was going by this time, “El Parker.” He didn’t seem to notice her awkward lull, thankfully.

“Nice to meet you too. Hey, thanks again. You’re making a twelve year old musical participant from Indiana very happy tonight.” She beamed at him as he spoke.

“It was my pleasure,” She assured, taking a small bow.

His eyes crinkled at the corners as he laughed and El had never seen something so endearing.

As they stopped giggling, Mike gradually straightened up and grabbed his bag, slowly making his way to the door.

“Well, bye El, I’ll see you around,” he brought a hand up, pushing his hair out of the way as he stood in the door.

She beamed back at him, all feeling in her fingers gone as she gripped her sweater sleeves, “Bye, Mike Wheeler, I hope Holly likes her book.”

“I’m sure she will, thanks again,” he waved as he pushed the door open, his insides feeling like they were about to drop out of him completely.

Once she knew he was gone, once he was completely out of earshot, El let out a breath she didn’t know she’d been holding.

Wow...

Mike trudged up the four flights of stairs to his apartment, mind replaying his interaction with El over and over again. When he'd left the shop, he was feeling pretty okay with how it had gone. But by the time he was at his front door, Mike had convinced himself he'd blown it completely.

Stupid, stupid, stupid idiot.

Twisting his key in the lock, his thoughts were cut off by blaringly loud singing coming from the kitchen.

Mike dragged his feet through the door, dropping his stuff on the coffee table as he passed it. Mouthwatering smells were wafting through the air, reminding him how hungry he was.

Following the loud noises, Mike glanced over and saw Lucas sitting on the kitchen counter, speaker in hand as he happily flipped through several songs before playing *Can't Fight This Feeling* by REO Speedwagon.

"Ohhhh nice pick man, a classic!" Dustin exclaimed from his spot near the stove. He was dropping seasoning into a tall pot, the inside of which looked an awful lot like Mike's favorite meal, chicken tortilla soup.

Mike let the two of them sing in peace for a few minutes before he made himself known, walking closer and clapping along as they sang.

It was by no means the weirdest thing he'd ever come home to, and at this point he just accepted their eccentricities and went along with it.

They noticed he was there at the same time, welcoming him by singing even louder and off-key in his direction. Embracing the moment, feeling particularly carefree and jovial, Mike joined in, grabbing a nearby ladle to use as a microphone.

Performing wildly and dramatically, Mike felt his concerns about his

interaction with El fade away.

As the song came to a close, Lucas turned down the music enough so that they could talk.

“Look at you, all smiley and cheerful,” Dustin commented, shoving Mike playfully as he slid by to grab a knife and an onion. “Good timing too, we’re making your favorite soup as an ‘I’m sorry we turned the shop into a hockey arena’ apology.”

“Correction,” Lucas jibed, “YOU’RE making his favorite soup, because you lost loser!” He turned to Mike proudly, “I won, scored four times in like five minutes.”

Dustin looked up from where he was cutting onions, “Hey I had a disadvantage! The stupid light post outside was *blinding* me,” he proclaimed dramatically.

Mike laughed, gesturing to Dustin while looking at Lucas, “Well, obviously this was not a fair game. The light post was *BLINDING* him for god sakes!”

The three boys keeled over laughing in the kitchen, stomach's cramping, tears leaking out of their eyes.

Mike wheezed out, “You...you clearly need a rematch. You know, to settle the score. To end this battle once and for all.” They broke out into a fit of giggles again, and for a moment it felt like they’d never stop.

“Wow, you’re really in a good mood tonight huh? What happened from when we saw you last?” Dustin inquired once he caught his breath, chopping up some tomatoes now.

Mike blushed beet red, thinking about El, about how she beamed at him and didn’t make fun of his rambling. Suddenly, he didn’t know what to do with his hands. He picked up the ladle again and twisted it in between his long fingers.

“Well...I left you guys to your antics and went over to the bookstore.” He blushed again, twisting the ladle faster. “There was, um...there was this girl-”

“FUCK!!” Dustin’s painful shriek cut Mike off mid-sentence. “Ow, ow, shit SHIT shit shit!” He exclaimed, pulling his now profusely bleeding hand away from the cutting board.

“Oh shit!” Lucas and Mike shouted simultaneously, both rushing over to his side. They pulled his bleeding hand towards the sink, both shouting instructions that no one could understand.

“Shit that fucking *hurts* shit! Damn those tomatoes!!” He swore as he ran his hand under the water.

“Dude, what happened?!” Lucas asked, leaning against the counter.

“I, fuck, I was cutting the stupid tomatoes and it wouldn’t go through and then the fucking knife slipped and then,” he gestured to his injured hand, “this!”

Mike pulled Dustin’s arm away from under the water, “Let me see it. Is it deep?”

Yes, it was deep. *Shit.*

The cut was about two inches long, running along the side of his thumb and onto the top of his hand.

Lucas and Mike winced as they took it in. *Ouch.*

Dustin shot a pleading look towards Lucas, “Dude, please tell me this qualifies. Because if not, I’m going to be pissed.”

“Of course it qualifies, look at you, you’re about to lose that hand!” Lucas affirmed, knocking him hard on the shoulder.

Mike let out a breath he didn’t know he was holding. Thank god, sometimes Lucas was picky about what qualified.

Dustin outstretched his injured hand in Lucas’s direction, holding a paper towel underneath to catch blood as it seeped out and dropped to the floor. Lucas put one delicate hand under Dustin’s wrist before pressing three fingers over the cut itself. Dustin winced and swore under his breath.

Channeling a power he didn't know the origins of, Lucas closed his eyes and focused his mind, pushing all of his energy onto the deep cut.

Mike and Dustin stared in awe as the skin on the latter's hand mended together, completely erasing any sign of an injury except for a slight scar that would disappear as the night went on. Once Lucas let Dustin's hand go, he shook it out, staring at the scar, impressed.

"Thanks man." He said appreciatively. Lucas nodded back.

Exhaling heavily, Mike blanched with wide eyes, "I still can't believe you can do that. Healing people and all, it's so fucking cool. You're like a superhero."

Lucas grinned sullenly, "Yeah, I guess."

Dustin nodded along, moving back to his cutting board and beginning to slice the tomatoes a bit more carefully, "It's totally like you're a superhero! Insane, absolutely insane."

A beat passed, "I wonder if there's anybody else out there who can do what you do."

Lucas laughed, "Wouldn't that be neat."

Notes for the Chapter:

Oh my god, I absolutely loved writing this chapter. Mike and El!! Lucas, Dustin, and Mike!! I am so excited to get this whole story out, it's been sitting in my brain for far too long. Let me know what you think!! I love reading your theories and thoughts!!

6. Blenders

She flipped the light switches off, saying goodnight to the bookstore for the evening before locking the door and setting off in a fast walk down the street. Normally, El *hated* walking home alone past closing time. She could always feel eyes on her through the darkness, staring at her, judging her, tracking her. Max's voice in her head constantly reminded her this was "paranoia", a fancy word that she had introduced when El had tried to describe this fear she had of being watched, of being taken again.

On this night, however, El couldn't bring herself to worry about people watching her. How could she when the only thing on her mind was a tall boy with dark floppy hair and positively stunning eyes?

Striding along the sidewalk towards the train station, El felt her lips pull up in a smile as she went over their interaction again and again. Pulling a hand to her mouth, she bit her nail to hide her grin.

Mike Wheeler had been so awkward in *such* an endearing way, what with his fidgety hands and sweet rambling about his baby-not-baby sister. Mulling over each and every detail with flushing cheeks, El pressed everything she could remember about him to memory. Yearning to keep it all. She knew far too well that these kinds of moments were rare, especially for her.

As she found her seat on the train, El's soft smile dropped, sadness pouring into every inch of her mind.

Wistfully, she reminded herself that nothing would happen. Nothing *could* happen. It simply wasn't possible. She wasn't like the strong, beautiful women in her books that got to fall in love and live happily ever after. No, she wasn't even close.

Anger flared in her stomach as she wished for a life she would never have. One in which she'd been raised in this wonderful world, not locked inside, tortured day in and day out. One in which she could be normal and go to school and be happy. One in which she wasn't plagued by guilt and nightmares from a past she was ingrained with.

El shut her eyes sullenly, rubbing her hands on either side her temples. She slumped down in her seat and turned her head to stare longingly out the train, watching the tall buildings with glowing windows pass her by.

It was no use to dwell on such depressing things, she knew that. They'd escaped and they were making lives for themselves now. It was more than she could have ever dreamed of five years ago. Still, sometimes her mind felt so dark and heavy and alone that El was afraid she'd just drop one day.

Then again, as she peeked inside her bag, where her brand-new copy of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* rested snugly against her other books, she thought that maybe it wasn't all bad.

Max was sitting cross-legged on the couch, staring at her computer and nursing a glass of red wine when El got home that night. Various papers sat strewn about all over the coffee table, sticky notes and colored labels decorating their edges.

Mumbling a greeting as she passed by, El made her way to her room, looking forward to putting on some comfier clothes and starting in on her new book. Max waved when she walked past the couch, not glancing up from the laptop in front of her.

After pulling on her plaid pajama bottoms and throwing a nice, heavy sweatshirt over her head, El tottered over to the kitchen. Her stomach grumbled, reminding her she hadn't eaten since leaving A Coffee Shop before her shift started this morning, although Lucas *had* made some killer scones, and she'd eaten a lot of them. So really it wasn't her worst effort yet.

Throwing some pre-made macaroni and cheese in the microwave, El's gaze drifted over to Max, who still hadn't seemed to move (or breathe) since she'd gotten home.

Sliding her socked feet across the tile, El nosed over to the couch, standing over Max for a long while before reaching down and poking her in the cheek.

“Hey. Hey you.” She poked again. “Snap out of it.”

Max’s lips twitched up. El smiled before poking her one more time. Finally, Max tore her stare away from the screen and smiled up at El.

“Have I ever told you how annoying you are?”

El brought a hand up, tapping her chin in mock-curiosity. She pretended to think for a moment, “Hmm...not that I can remember. Was it this week? Or last week? Or every day for like five years now?”

Max raised a hand and poked El in the belly-button, “Ha ha ha, good one. You should be a comedian.” El knew this was sarcasm, she’d grown *very* used to it living with Max for so long.

Retrieving her now hot and ready mac and cheese from the microwave, El sat in the light yellow armchair next to the couch, pulling a knitted blanket over her chilly feet.

“How was your day? Hang out with your coffee shop boys again?” This was a loaded question, El chose to stare at her food rather than at Max as she mulled over her answer.

Max hadn’t exactly been pleased when El told her all about Dustin and Lucas. She had a right to be, making friends was not really part of their plan. But, as El argued, they’d using the same names for over a year now, and there were no signs that anyone was on to them. As long as they never found out about her true identity, and what she could do, El couldn’t see a problem. Max had grumbled a bit more, mumbling under her breath that she was going to run background checks on them just in case.

“Yeah, I stopped by this morning before work.” She took a bite of her pasta. “You know, I think you’d really like them. They’re both really goofy and funny. I’m always laughing when I’m with them.”

Max gave her a soft smile, “I’m glad, you deserve it, and they do sound pretty funny.” She raised her eyebrows and swirled her wine glass in the air, “Of course, I know that’s not you ranking them above *me* in comedic abilities. No, that would be *outrageous* .” She flipped

her long tresses over her shoulder before taking a long sip.

El broke out into a fit of giggles, “Oh my, of *course* not! How could anyone measure up to you? It’s not even a competition.”

The two girls laughed a while longer, enjoying the calm of the evening.

Heart thumping wildly, El debated in her head whether or not to bring up Mike. She wanted desperately to talk to Max about him, but for some reason, she also wanted to keep him in her head.

She didn’t get a chance to decide, as Max broke her train of thought.

“I got more data at Intex today. Too much data, really.” El jerked her head up from her food, intrigued.

“What kind of data?” She asked.

“Well, I was finally able to sneak into the CEO’s office and break into his main server when he left for lunch today. I swear, that guy never backs up his computer, he had a *shit ton* of information just sitting there, waiting to be found!” Max gestured to the laptop perched in front of her. “I got it all back here, but it’s going to take me months to dig through all of it. Still, I’m onto something here.”

Max had been “onto something” for a while now. After living under the radar for a few years, she had made it her personal mission to find out everything she could about the prison they’d escaped from. El didn’t know what she was going to do with all this information once she got it, but she had a feeling revenge was her core purpose.

Grunting softly in response, El quietly affirmed, “Well, looks like you’ve got your work cut out for you.”

The two sat morosely for a few heavy moments, dark thoughts passing from one girl to the other.

There was a change in the cold air. It somehow became stiff and unrelenting as Max leaned forward, shutting her computer and setting it on the table. Scooting closer to El, she rubbed her hands up and down her arms.

“Do you...do you think you could try again?” She asked softly. El drew her eyebrows together, glancing down at her hands. She hesitated a moment before answering.

“Um...I mean I could...but Max, it’s never worked. He’s just...just not there.”

“Please?” Max’s pleading eyes were boring into her head, she could feel it.

El sighed deeply, nodding her head slightly. She reached forward and set her bowl on the table, firmly planting her feet on the floor and relaxing her spine. Closing her eyes and listening to the white noise echoing in the silence, El entered the Void.

She pictured his soft face, his kind eyes, *anything* she could remember about him. Walking slowly through the wet ground of the Void, she glanced around, looking for Will’s body. Spinning around, pacing forwards and backwards, El focused everything she could on seeing Will, wherever he was and in whatever *state* he may be in at this point.

Nothing.

Her eyes shot open, blood dripping down her lip. She glanced at Max, shaking her head dejectedly.

Max sighed, running a hand through her flaming hair.

“I just...I don’t understand why you can’t see his body at all. You could see people they’d killed before, it wasn’t like their physical being just disappeared, you know? I just...I don’t get it.”

El nodded in agreement, it confused her too. “I think...I think maybe it’s me? Maybe I can’t take the sight of his...of Will’s *body*, and my mind is just...protecting me.”

Max muttered something unintelligible under her breath, nodding slowly.

“Yeah, that’s probably it.”

They were bickering about blenders when she walked in the next morning.

“I just don’t get why you won’t make the stupid smoothie.”

“Lucas I told you, I don’t deal with blenders! They’re a stupid appliance and they have no place in my life!” Dustin stood behind the register, waving his hands up and down rapidly.

Lucas leaned against the counter between the front and the kitchen, mouth agape and eyebrows drawn in confusion.

“What, do you have some deep dark hidden blender-related trauma that you aren’t telling me about?” Lucas inquired sarcastically.

Dustin scoffed, “And what if I do, huh? Then you’d feel pretty guilty. Shaming my anti-blending beliefs.” He spun back around as El neared closer, giggling to herself as she listened to their exchange.

“Oh, hey El. Would you mind telling Mr. Smoothie back there that blenders are a ridiculous contraption and that they should serve no real function in modern life?”

El set her bag down, running a hand through her loose waves. Pulling herself up onto the barstool, she sent an apologetic look towards the curly haired boy, “Dustin...buddy...I’m really sorry, but I think I’m with Lucas on this one. I’m pro-blender, unfortunately.”

A loud “HA!” echoed from the back followed by the unmistakable clatter of plastic plates slamming into the floor.

El flinched at the noise but recovered quickly, rubbing her hands together under the counter. Dustin continued to stare in El’s direction, seemingly unconcerned with Lucas’s accident.

“I’m hurt El, I thought you’d be on my side on this one.” He held a dramatic hand to his chest. “But I guess...everyone’s entitled to their own opinions. Even if they’re wrong.” He fanned his face, running a finger down his cheek to mimic tear drops, “This is a heavy blow... but I will recover...in time.” And with a dramatic push off the

counter, he set off to help Lucas pick up whatever it was he'd dropped.

El grinned and shook her head as he walked away. *Goofy boy.* Turning to her bag, she pulled out her dog-eared, roughed up copy of *The Great Gatsby*, excited to dive back into the 1920s. She pulled her cardigan down her arms a bit, covering up a particularly nasty scar resting near the curve of her elbow. El shuddered as she recalled the sting of the knife that had put it there, feeling as if it had happened yesterday.

Just as she opened the book and started back in on Nick's uncomfortable dinner with the Buchanans, an oddly familiar voice rang out through the shop.

"Sorry! Sorry! I overslept!" El froze on the spot, not daring to budge an inch as a tall boy with lanky legs darted from the door to the back room.

Was that...? What? She kept her eyes glued to her book, reading through a whole page without absorbing the words at all.

Why was he here? Why did her friends care if he overslept?

She raised her eyebrows and sat up straighter.

Oh. Mike.

In a flurry, Mike burst through the door to the backroom and threw his stuff on the table before quickly hurrying to the kitchen. *Shit, I'm so late, fuck.*

He staggered to a stop before nearly tripping over Dustin and Lucas's squatting forms when he walked through the entryway. The two were picking up various plates and dishes strewn about the ground, spitting harsh mumbles at each other. Mike caught the words "blender", "Satan", and "drama queen".

"Guys! Why didn't you wake me up? I'm like an hour late!" He questioned, scooting out of the way as they finished cleaning.

Lucas stood up, stacking his plates on the counter. He wiped his hands on his plaid shirt before shrugging, "You were tired from your flight, we thought you'd like a little more time to sleep."

Mike's shoulders relaxed slowly, "Well, thanks, but a heads up would've been nice. I've been panicking for the last half hour trying to get over here as fast as possible."

Dustin grinned, "We know. That was part of the fun! You get so flustered when you think you're late, it's funny." Lucas avoided eye contact, suddenly finding the newly stacked plates very interesting.

Dustin nodded, his knees cracking as he straightened up. He gestured out to the shop, "Plus there's like, never anybody here this early."

Lucas shook his head, breaking out of his trance, "Not true! El's always here!"

Mike's wide eyes shot up to meet Lucas's at the mention of her name. His mouth fell open in confusion as he began stuttering a thousand questions.

Dustin's eyes widened, "Oh yeahhh! You haven't met El yet! Come here, she's our new friend!" He dragged a startled Mike by the arm out to the front of the shop. "She started popping up like a month ago while you were gone, she's really cool. Except when she takes Lucas's side." Lucas shot Dustin a dangerous look.

As they broke through the door to the counter, Mike's stomach dropped, his face draining of color and his heart stopping completely.

She slowly rose her gaze up from her book and locked eyes with him. Her lips twitched up as she lifted a hand to brush her soft hair behind her ears.

With a shuddering breath she hoped no one could hear, she smiled at him, "Hi..."

Dustin and Lucas, detecting none of this, soldiered on.

"El, this is Mike! He's the other friend we were telling you about!" Lucas said excitedly.

Neither of them moved, both stuck staring for a moment too long. When the pause got a little too long, El decided to make the first move.

“We’ve uh...we’ve met, actually.” She tore her gaze away, finding it easier to look at the other boys. Her face heated up as she began playing with the corner edge of her book page nervously.

Dustin and Lucas exchanged confused glances, “Wait, what? When?” The former spoke up.

It was Mike’s turn, facing his friends and anxiously crossing his arms, “Oh uh, last night, in the bookstore. I was picking up that book for Holly, remember?”

The other boys frowned, trying to recall any stories from the night before. Lucas got it first.

“Oh yeah!! So...El was the girl you were all smiley about before the-” He cut himself off abruptly, shooting a quick look towards El.

Dustin recovered swiftly, “Before dinner!”

Blushing beet red, Mike thought that if the ground swallowed him up right there and then, he’d be endlessly grateful.

“Yeah, yeah thanks yeah.” *I’m going to kill them.*

El didn’t seem phased, instead, she laughed and outstretched an arm over the counter. Mike got the hint and slowly slid his twitchy hand into her small one, shaking it twice before letting go.

“Well, it’s nice to meet you again, Mike.” Butterflies fluttered against her stomach as she gazed into his dark eyes.

“El was just betraying everything that I stand for, if you were wondering,” Dustin interjected, shooting a hurt look in her direction.

She scoffed once before adding, “I’m pro-blender! It’s just not something that can be changed!”

Mike huffed, “Oh god, this again? Dustin, buddy, I think your anti-

blender committee has exactly one member. You.” Dustin raised his eyebrows, inhaling deeply before launching back into all the reasons blenders were an unnecessary force of evil in kitchens.

The four chatted energetically for the next half hour, the slow flow of customers working to their advantage. Mike kept shooting quick glances in El’s direction, hoping she wouldn’t notice him. He was trying not to look like a total freak in front of her, but his idiot friends were not helping.

“I’m just saying!” Dustin was pleading to Mike, “Something would be a great cat name!” Mike slapped a hand over his face as the topic was brought up *again*.

El frowned, “Like the word, Something?” She asked.

Dustin nodded vigorously, but before he could continue, Mike cut him off, sending El an exhausted look.

“He has this idea that we should get a cat and name it Something. That way, he could yell stuff like, ‘Something’s outside!’ or ‘Something’s hungry!’ or ‘Something’s coming in the room!’” El’s lips pressed together as she tried not to laugh.

“Tell me that’s not the *greatest* idea you’ve ever heard!” Dustin enthused. Mike was quick to fire back.

“That’s not the greatest idea I’ve ever heard,” he deadpanned. Lucas and El broke into giggles, the latter of which made Mike’s heart pound a little quicker.

El leaned her elbows on the counter, twisting her fingers together, “Well, if it counts. Max used to have a cat that she named Cat.” The boys shot her inquisitive looks. “I know, it’s very original. She hated the thing, though, so it was just easy for her to say stuff like, ‘Cat, come here.’ or ‘Cat, eat your stupid food.’”

All three boys laughed along before Lucas spoke up.

“When do we get to meet Max? You guys have been glued at the hip for what sounds like a while now, she should stop by someday!” Lucas pleaded.

El frowned a bit, “I don’t know...she can be kinda standoffish...Plus, she’s got some insane dry wit humor...I don’t think you guys could take her.”

The boys all straightened up, taking her words as a personal challenge.

“Well now we *have* to meet her!” Dustin exclaimed. He shot a hand in the air as the idea came into his head, “Wait! You said you guys had never seen *The Goonies*, right? Or *E.T.* or *Jaws* or any of the best 80’s movies?” El shook her head, spinning around on her chair.

Dustin exchanged excited glances with Mike and Lucas, “Come to our movie night! We do it like every other Friday or so! Yeah, yeah, we’ll get pizza and everything! That way we could meet Max and you could *finally* see some of the cinematic greats!”

El was nodding along nervously. She continued spinning on her barstool as she imagined it.

It *did* sound like fun...and she *wanted* Max to meet the boys...she just didn’t know how her cautious friend would take it.

She could feel Dustin’s pleading eyes boring into her. Relaxing her shoulders and taking a quick peek at Mike, she gave in, “Okay, fine, I’ll ask her tonight.”

Dustin and Lucas whooped before giving each other quick high fives. Mike stared at his shoes, smiling.

To say she was nervous about Max meeting her new friends was an understatement, but nevertheless, El couldn’t help but feel excited. She’d never had real friends to hang out with before, and these guys were so kind and open and inviting. Going to their apartment to have food and watch movies *sounded* like a really fun night.

Her ears turning pink, El realized it was also a great excuse to see Mike again.

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm so overwhelmed by the love and support you

guys are giving this story :) I swear you guys are the greatest ever. I'm going to try and update as soon as possible! Thank you thank you thank you! Comment what you think!

Oh and btw I went back and tweaked the timeline a bit. All you need to know (if you've been reading along so far) is that instead of this all taking place in springtime, it's autumn. Trust me, it'll be worth it.

7. Jean Grey and Scary Movies

“I can’t believe you roped me into this,” Max complained as they came to a stop in front of the tall apartment building. Her arms sat crossed over her leather jacket, a frown painting her sloping features.

El sighed, running a nervous hand through her carefully set waves, “Hey! You said you would be peppy! No complaining, it’ll be fun I promise!”

“I said I’d ACT peppy, not that I would be,” She grumbled back, pulling the door open to let El inside.

Convincing Max to join her for movie night had been a battle in and of itself. It was one thing for El to start making friends, it was another entirely for her to try and pull Max into the picture.

When she’d initially asked, Max had fervently opposed it, declaring that any situation in which either of them was in a strange place with no plan of escape was out of the question. El had rolled her eyes, informing her (once again) that not only did these boys have absolutely zero connection to the super-powered world, but they also had nothing to hide, as Max’s extensive background checks had proven.

Max had not been convinced in the slightest, painfully reminding El what had happened the last time either of them got close to anyone.

Her mind had jerked to the diner, to the shot that had pierced the silence as their first friend, their first contact after being on the run for three months, was murdered.

With a harsh glare, El had retorted, “What happened to Benny was not your fault, or my fault, or his fault. You know that.”

Nevertheless, the subject had been dropped for the evening, both girls swamped with flashbacks and images of their past mistakes.

El was determined, however. So she brought it up every single day for the next week, unwavering in her mission to convince Max to

meet her friends.

By day four, El knew she was beginning to wear her down.

By day six, she was close enough to start planning ahead.

By day nine, just as Max was about to throw in the towel, El pulled out her greatest weapon. Pouting her lips and staring up at Max with her big brown eyes, El began to tear up.

It didn't take long.

"Fine! Fine fine fine! We'll go and meet your friends and watch movies and...and WHATEVER. But we are *not* staying late. AND I'm going to map out every single possible escape exit from their building."

El had jumped up, hugging her friend tightly, excitedly shouting, "Thank you thank you thank you thank you thank you!!" Before darting off to pick out what she wanted to wear for the night in question.

And so they stood, Max pointing out the security cameras in front of the lobby door and the emergency stairwells running up the sides of the building as they waited for the elevator.

"Remember. Exit number one is down the south fire escape and to the center of town. Exit number two is down to the lobby and through the emergency escape. Exit number three-"

"I got it! It's okay, we've gone over it plenty of times now," El cut her off mid-lecture as the elevator doors opened.

Max huffed, mumbling under her breath before aggressively slamming her hand on the level four button.

As the elevator took them up, El begged her thumping heart to stop pounding so hard. She didn't know if it was from nervousness or excitement, but either way it made her feel all twitchy. She toyed with the sleeves of her light jean jacket, swaying back and forth on her feet.

It's only Dustin, and Lucas, and...and Mike. It's okay. I'm okay. Everything's okay.

Max eyed her as they exited the elevator, "You all right there, spaz?"

El's eyes jerked up to meet her friend's, "What? Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine."

Completely unconvinced, Max raised an eyebrow before sighing heavily, "Alright come on, let's go have fun with your wack-o friends." El's eyes settled, shooting Max a look of appreciation as they neared the door.

Apartment 415. That's what they said, 415.

El raised a hand and knocked three times, just like she'd seen on TV.

Oh god, what if he didn't say 415. What if it's actually 416, or 417 or-

Her panicked thoughts were quelled as the door swung open, revealing a flustered Dustin in a lime green apron, flour spattered across his cheek.

"Oh thank goodness El, you're right on time. You can help me knock some sense into these FOOLS," before he could say more, he noticed Max in the corner. "Oh hi! You must be the famous-yet-mysterious Max," he stuck out a hand, "It's nice to meet you finally! I'm Dustin."

Max took his hand slowly, shaking it and eyeing him up and down with a raised eyebrow, "That's me, as I guess you've heard," she answered back.

Dustin took a step back, gesturing for them to come inside, "We're all in the living room slash kitchen, preparing to go to egg-war." El frowned, turning to Max for help, but she looked just as confused.

As they walked further inside, El took in the boys' apartment for the first time. They didn't seem to have any color scheme in particular picked out, opting instead to have just about every color sprinkled around the room. A long navy blue couch with non-matching red chairs framed the TV area in the living room. White carpet with more than a couple colorful stains lined the floor. Deep green curtains covered the large glass window on the opposite side of the room.

From her spot in the entryway, El could see three light blue bedroom doors, two on the right side of the apartment, and a third on the left side, just past the kitchen. It all looked very lived-in and homey, not unlike Max and El's own apartment.

The kitchen stood just off the living room area, an open entryway leading inside with a quaint barstool area that created a window in which one could sit and peer in. As soon as she glanced in it's direction, El caught a glimpse of a boy with dark, floppy hair behind the counter. She quickly looked away, blushing unknowingly.

"Hey guys, look who's here and ready to take my side!" Dustin announced as they walked closer.

Mike's eyes shot up, finding El's immediately. He grinned, lifting a hand to wave hello to her.

She smiled, "Hey guys! This..." El gestured to her companion, "...is Max! Max, that's Lucas," Lucas waved from his spot at the stove, "And that's Mike," she pointed him out shyly.

They both responded with enthusiastic greetings, smiling kindly at the two of them.

"Nice to meet you guys, El's told me a lot about you all," Max responded politely.

"And you still wanted to come?" Lucas joked. They all laughed, breaking the slight tension in the air. Dustin walked back into the kitchen as El and Max took seats on the barstools. They appeared to be making pizza from scratch, as a big lump of dough sat in a pile on the cutting board in front of Mike. Lucas was rolling out another huge lump on the other side of the counter, Mike seemingly monitoring the dough in front of him.

Before she could ask, Dustin, who was digging through the fridge, started back in, "Okay so, opinion," he began, not stopping as his two friends started groaning behind him, "have you seen *Beauty and the Beast*?"

Max's eyebrows pulled together, "Like the cartoon princess movie?"

Dustin stood up, nodding rigorously. El shot a questioning look towards Mike, who shook his head at her as if to say, 'wait for it.'

"Yeah, I've seen it, why?" Max answered, seemingly giving Dustin exactly what he was looking for.

"WELL, you know Gaston? The bad guy? Well we were listening to his song the other day, and in it, he claims to have eaten *five dozen* eggs every single day since he was, quote, 'grown'." Max and El stared at him, eyebrows raised expectantly. "Five DOZEN eggs every day! That's sixty eggs a day! Sixty! Eggs! Every day!" He hands were waving wildly at this point. "So, my question to you both, is how do you think he got his hands on sixty eggs every day in 18th century France?"

El grinned, peering at Max who looked both completely surprised and bewildered by his ardent questioning.

She put a gentle hand on Max's arm. "You'll get used to it," she said helpfully.

Mike stepped in enthusiastically, " I think he paid for it by hunting. I mean that seems to be his whole deal, right? He's like the big, strong hunter? So, he probably caught animals and stuff and then traded it out for huge quantities of eggs. Why he wanted to eat that many, I don't know, but that's my best guess." He ran a hand through his hair before taking a sip of his drink.

El frowned, thinking deeply. She twirled her fingers together as she thought.

"Well...let's say he is a hunter and he trades meat for eggs. Can that town even make sixty eggs a day? It seemed pretty small in the movie, and I don't know how many chickens they've got, but I imagine it would take a *lot* of them to pop out five dozen every day." She paused, tapping a finger against her chin. "And if all of them are saved for Gaston, does nobody else in the town get any?"

Mike nodded as she spoke, his lips twitching up, "Good point! Belle did make an effort to mention how small the town was, so either they specialize in egg production, or they've got a *lot* of chickens and

Gaston is hogging all of them.”

El laughed, lifting a hand up in agreement, “Maybe that’s why Belle hates him so much! I mean, besides all the vanity and arrogance and stuff. She can’t get any eggs because he’s eating all of them!”

Mike was just about to add on, his eyes locked on hers and a grin painting his features, when Lucas jumped in.

“Okay, but can I ask why this matters?”

“Thank you!” Max exclaimed, mouth gaping open at the ridiculous conversation.

El blushed as Dustin, who was pulling ingredients out of the refrigerator, disregarded both of them, “Alright, so we’ve established that Gaston’s a greedy hunter who’s robbing the town of all their eggs. The real question is, how many eggs does that mean he’s eaten in his life, and should he have died from it already?”

The debate progressed quickly as they whipped out calculators to determine just how unhealthy of a lifestyle Gaston had fictionally been living. After the pizzas were put in the oven, Max and Lucas were paired up on what Dustin called the “Anti-Fun Committee”, as they didn’t seem to care at all about the major topic at hand. However, once Mike and El had come to the conclusion that Gaston had to have eaten at least *six-hundred thousand eggs* in his short lifetime, they jumped in.

“Okay, what?” Max had challenged. “There’s no way. Uh uh, no, he could not have eaten *that many* in his life.”

El had excitedly swiped Mike’s calculator out of his hand, proudly showing it off, “Look! We did the math! It says it right there!” Mike felt his ears redden.

Max stared at it, “So...what? Did he *only* eat eggs his whole life?”

Lucas jumped in, “That must’ve gotten pretty boring. If he was a hunter, don’t you think he would have eaten some of the things he’d caught?”

“Or did he just like to kill animals?” Dustin added on.

This launched the group into a whole new debate on whether or not Gaston was a complete psychopath, as well as if he had consumed anything *besides* eggs his whole life.

As she smiled and laughed along, El tried to keep up with her fast-talking, quick-thinking weirdo friends, feeling completely at ease.

“So...what do you think of them?” El asked Max quietly. They’d retrieved their pizza, eating in the living room as the boys cleaned up and got the movie ready. El sat in the corner of the couch, facing Max who sat comfortably in the adjacent armchair.

“Well, I see why you like them, that’s for sure.” El raised her eyebrows, taking a bite out of her food. Max continued, “I think...I think they’re bozos, but they’re growing on me.”

El smiled contently, “Aww, you like them! It’s okay. You can admit it, I was right.”

Max furrowed her brow, “Oh trust me sweets, I’ve still got all the escape routes mapped out in my head.” She tapped her temple as she spoke.

El stood up, setting her plate on the coffee table, “Mmhm, sure thing.”

She turned to the kitchen, walking closer to the boys, “Um, is there a restroom I can use?” She asked.

Mike spun around, drying his hands on a dish towel as he wiped the counter down, “Oh uh, well our, like, guest bathroom isn’t working right now, but you can use the one in my room, it’s just through there!” He gestured to the light blue bedroom door next to the kitchen.

“Thanks,” she responded, smiling softly at him. She made her way to the door, opening it slowly before entering.

Switching the light on, El went to wash her hands in the bathroom adjacent to the door. Once she was done, she walked out and peered at her surroundings, observing Mike's room for the first time. She smiled to herself, brushing her hair back and pulling her jacket tighter around her front as she looked around.

He had brightly colored movie posters plastered on every wall. She recognized some from their names, like *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*, and *Ghostbusters*, others, though, she couldn't place. From their retro names and appearances, though, she guessed they were movies from a while ago.

Walking slowly around the room, El took in his dark bedspread and fluffy pillows, as well as a bunch of textbooks that were stacked up on the nightstand.

Peering around, she caught sight of his bookcase, and immediately stepped forward to look at the titles. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Hobbit*, *Room*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *The Road*, and *The Great Gatsby* all sat, worn and weary on his shelf, amongst many others. She approved of his reading selections, having read many of them herself.

Grinning, El ran a finger along the spines of some smaller book she didn't recognize. They seemed to be wrapped in clear, plastic bagging. She furrowed her brow, pulling one out so she could see it.

On the front cover sat a cartoon woman with fiery red hair. It flowed around her, creating a crowning halo. The woman held her hand out, eyes glowing brightly. Peering down at the tagline, El frowned, reading the words, "Jean Grey! See this X-Men save the world with only her mind!" in bright, popping letters.

She was so wrapped up in the comic book, she didn't hear him come in.

"That's Jean Grey, or Dark Phoenix, or whatever you want to call her." El jumped back, startled by his sudden appearance. He stood in the doorway, hands in his pockets.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have...I was just...It just looked very" She stuttered, breathing deeply and trying to find the words.

Mike shrugged, walking a bit closer to where she stood, "It's fine, I was just coming to tell you the movie was ready," he grinned as he saw the comic book in her hand, "You picked a good one!" He assured, holding out his hand, gesturing to the thin comic book. She gladly let go, setting it in his hand with shaky fingers. Her hand brushed his during the exchange, and El felt a warm shiver run down her spine.

"She has telekinesis. You know, like moving stuff with her mind."

El's tried to appear as normal as possible, but it was tricky now that her stomach was fluttering gently, "Oh! That's...that's cool!"

She winced as her answer came out all skittish and flustered. Mike just made her so *nervous* for some reason. She lazily pondered the reasons why as she gazed up at his kind, soft face, freckles dotting his nose and cheekbones.

"She was one of my favorite superheroes growing up, I thought she was just the coolest," He laughed to himself, gazing at the comic book in admiration.

He turned to her, and all of a sudden they were much closer than before, only an arm's length away. Face to face.

El felt her breath quicken as she took in his close proximity, still staring up into his dark eyes. Mike gazed down at her, all warm eyes and soft smile, and she began to feel a bit lightheaded.

Mike beamed at her for a moment longer before continuing, "Plus," he said gently, before moving a fraction of an inch closer, "I always had kind of a crush on her."

The butterflies tickling El's stomach were going crazy, warmth flooding her body from head to toe. As she looked up at him, she could have sworn he was blushing a bit, a slight pink tint dotting his cheeks.

Before either of them could figure out what exactly was happening, Lucas's loud voice echoed through the apartment, causing them both to jump, "Movie's starting you guys! Let's go!"

Trying to calm her rapid heartbeat, El sighed, turning back to Mike and gently taking the comic book out of his hand and returning it to its spot on the shelf.

Running her shaky fingers through her dark waves, El peered up at him, "You coming?"

He grinned back, nodding his head slowly before following out behind her.

"You're telling me his cute little alien friend just flies away?! And Elliot NEVER gets to see him again?!" El questioned dramatically, tears still present under her eyes from the sad ending of the movie. She wiped a quick hand under them, trying to get rid of any evidence.

Mike nodded sadly, peering at her, "Yep."

Dustin turned to look up at her from his spot on the floor, grinning wildly, "Don't worry El, just remember," he lifted a finger, bringing it up to her forehead, "I'll...be...right...here..."

Lips twitching up, El giggled at his terrible impression, swiping his hand away.

Max spoke up from her spot on the arm chair, "Well I still think *Jaws* was better. At least in that one, the shark exploded everywhere." She waved her hands up, illustrating the moment the shark had spewed guts and gore everywhere.

"Agreed," said Lucas approvingly. El scrunched her nose up.

"What? You not one for scary movies?" Mike teased as he saw her expression.

The answer toppled out of her mouth before she could stop it.

"I've had enough scary stuff for one lifetime, I don't need any more." Her eyes widened in horror as she realized what she had said. Swiveling her head around, she saw Max was wearing a similar facial

expression.

The boys all sat dumbstruck in their spots, Dustin on the floor, Lucas on the other arm chair, and Mike on the couch with her, frowns painting their features. A few awkward beats passed before Mike spoke up, concern etched on every inch of his face.

“I’m sorry,” He said sincerely, reaching a hand and putting it closer to where she sat on the couch. In an attempt to lighten the tone, he added, “We won’t do as many scary movies next time, I promise.” His kind eyes were on her again, she could feel it.

El gazed at him gratefully, thankful he didn’t ask further questions. She reached a hand out, gently placing it on top of his from his spot next to her.

She knew they all wanted to ask, they all wanted to know, but as she and Max were both well aware, they could *never* know.

Max broke the tension, “Well, look at the time, it’s pretty late. I think we’ve gotta get going, right El?”

El nodded, taking her hand away from his and standing up from her spot.

The two girls gathered their things, before making their way to the door. Mike followed behind them, with Dustin and Lucas staying behind, muttering about who had dibs on leftover pizza.

“Sorry we kept you guys so late, but you have to admit, that was pretty fun,” Mike said as they opened the front door, making their way into the hallway.

El smirked up at him, “Ehh, I *guess* it was alright.”

He scoffed, raising a hand to his chest in mock-pain, “Oh, you hurt me so.” They laughed together, seemingly forgetting Max, who was observing the interaction with interest.

“So...I’ll see you around?” El asked, still beaming up at him.

He shifted nervously on his feet, “Yeah! Yeah, yep.”

“Alright, well, bye Mike.” She said quietly, waving goodbye before turning her blushing face to Max, who stood with an eyebrow raised.

Lifting a hand to wave goodbye himself, Mike responded, “Bye El...bye Max!”

Feeling perfectly content and warmer than she’d been in a while, El strolled down the hallway, smiling to herself. As they neared the elevator, Max slung an arm over El’s petite shoulders, “Was I peppy enough?”

Notes for the Chapter:

If you couldn't tell, I do have some beef with this whole sixty-eggs-a-day deal. Anyways, I hope you like this one! Please comment what you think! I can't tell you enough how much I love reading what you think! And get ready, there's a whole lotta drama and a whole lotta fluff coming up soon....

8. Nightmares

She sat chained to the cold, metal table. Her wrists ached from the restraints digging into the skin, leaving it raw and red. Blood dripped out of her nose, pooling on her lip. Her eyes were heavy, so heavy, she just wanted to sleep. But he wouldn't let her.

He stared back with his cold, malicious icy eyes. They narrowed as she tried to stay upright, the sharp pain under her ribs flaring once more where the taser had just been.

"Subject Eleven," Brenner asked, hatred evident in his tone, "Tell the truth."

She couldn't remember the question, her brain moving at half-speed. But he needed an answer, or else the guard would come and bring more pain. Her heart was beating too fast, it would pop right out of her chest soon, she just knew it.

"Subject Eleven." His voice was tight, ready to combust.

Her eyes watered as she tried to come up with some sort of answer, her voice faint and weak, "I-I...I don't..."

Brenner rolled his eyes, nodding his head at the guard behind her. Her stomach dropped and a wave of panic rolled through her.

"Wait! I-I just...I can-"

Too late.

This time, the guard held her arm down as the cold edge of a knife cut against the underside of her arm, just above the crease in her elbow. She gasped as the hot, white pain dug into her skin, leaving a line of crimson blood in it's path.

The tears finally leaked out as she whimpered. Hunched over and heaving, strapped to the table, she felt endlessly vulnerable.

He was still glaring at her, "Now I'll ask again. What makes you think they want you?"

Her eyes shot up, brow furrowed, “W-What?”

Brenner slid several pictures across the table. Horror rocked through her as she made out the grinning faces of Mike, Dustin, Lucas, and Max through her tears.

He scoffed, “Look at you, Subject Eleven.” He stood up, staring down at her menacingly, “You’re used. Damaged. Broken. They don’t want you.” Brenner slid the picture closer, pointing to Mike’s kind face, “He doesn’t want you.”

Tears streamed down her face and she trembled in her seat, half-heartedly pulling at the restraints.

“You are worthless. Pathetic.” He slammed his hands down on the table, yelling furiously, “Look at me when I am talking to you!”

She sobbed roughly, fear and guilt pounding through her. Breathing heavily, she brought her watery eyes up to meet his. A venomous smile stretched across his face.

“What makes you think they want you?”

El shot up in her bed, sobs echoing through the room. Her chest heaved as tears fell down her face rapidly. Her face was flushed and she was just so hot, positively burning up. She faintly felt cold sweat dripping down her neck.

He’s here for me. He’s here for me. He’s here for me.

Wet eyes darting around frantically, she brought a shaking hand up to her forehead, wiping a shean of sweat away. El turned to her bedside, switching the light on as fast as she could, desperate to be out of the darkness plaguing both her room and her mind.

As light shot through the room, El felt her panicked heart stutter. Looking around her room, she saw her light yellow comforter, her small music box laying on her dresser, her only picture of Will, shaved head and all, leaning up against a stack of books.

She wasn't back there, she wasn't in that *place* . She was out, she was free. Breathing hard, El frantically pushed the covers back, scrambling off her bed.

What makes you think they want you?

Her head swam as her feet hit the carpet. Trembling from head to toe, she made her way to the bathroom.

Worthless. Pathetic.

She collapsed against sink, leaning on it with her whole weight. Her breath coming out in short, wheezing motions, she reached forward, turning the tap on. She let out a deep exhale as the cold water flowed onto her shaking fingers.

Used. Damaged. Broken.

El shuddered, splashing the cold water on the tear-streaked face. Her heart stuttered as her eyes shifted up. Staring at herself in the mirror above the sink, El shirked away as she took in her bedraggled appearance. Her hair was everywhere, bits sticking out every which way. Blotchy red marks dotted her face, leaving El feeling more broken than ever.

They don't want you.

Her eyes trailed down to her arms, where she knew small white lines and dots would be. Years of needles, knives, and cuts had marked her up, leaving scars running up and down her arms, legs, back, *everywhere*.

She was a shit-show, a horrifying sight, something to be controlled. Anger bubbled up from deep within her, mixing with her ever-present guilt and self-loathing, spinning in her head, spinning in her eyes.

He doesn't want you.

She was screaming before she even knew it.

Pounding her fists against the sink, El let out everything she'd been

holding in. She screamed out her fear, her frustration, her guilt, her *hatred* . Hatred of Brenner, hatred of her life, hatred of herself.

Her powers pulled themselves up without her permission, a wave of energy shooting out of her. The glass of the mirror shattered in million pieces, exploding outwards. El flinched and slammed her eyes shut as they shot out at her. The shards cut across her face and arms, the latter of which had flown up instinctively.

Breathing hard, El slowly opened her eyes and lowered her hands. Gashes twinged painfully on her forehead and across her cheek. A glance down showed blood trickling down her forearms from several small slits in her skin.

A broken sob ripped through her once more as she looked back up and saw only a broken, distorted version of herself in the remains of the mirror.

What makes you think they want you?

“Hey um, have you guys seen El lately?” Mike casually asked, carefully watching the reactions of his friends. It was closing time, and the three of them sat in a booth by the window, cleaning out all the dishes by hand.

“Huh, I guess not as much this week,” Dustin shrugged, Lucas grunting in agreement.

Mike had tried to make it seem like an offhand comment, or just a spontaneous observation, one that he’d just thought of now. But in truth, he hadn’t seen El in over a week, and it was really beginning to worry him.

Mike had grown very comfortable to her presence in his life. Every morning when he opened the shop, he could count on seeing her bright eyes smiling up at him, a thousand questions already on her mind.

El seemed to enjoy hearing about his life, what his mom and sisters were like, what his favorite books were, what kind of university

classes he was taking, if he preferred rain over snow, his opinion on peanut butter, just...everything. It was as if she was making a case file on him alone. He always answered her, even if he was busy or if she repeated them from time to time.

But as he'd noticed lately, whenever Mike tried to question El about her own life, she always found an excuse to avoid answering.

When he asked if she had any brothers or sisters, she suddenly burned her tongue on her drink, even though she'd been sipping on it for an hour.

When he asked where she grew up, she coincidentally remembered she was late to a shift.

And though he had no way to prove it, when he asked if she played any sports growing up, a tray that he had *just* carefully set down on the back counter mysteriously clattered to the floor.

Mike guessed that El was just cautious, especially after her ambiguous comment at the movie night about having had too much "scary stuff" in her life.

His mother's voice rang out in his head, telling him to lay off and stop prying into other people's lives.

But whenever he saw her sweet brown eyes light up as she laughed, whenever her small frame waltzed through the front door of the shop, whenever she said his *name* for fuck's sake, he couldn't help but want to know more. More about her life, more about what she loved, more about what she hated, just...everything.

Mike was in fucking deep and he fucking knew it.

But before he could process this, she was gone. El had been absent from the shop for the past eight mornings, and her disappearance was beginning to take a toll on him.

He was less focused in class, mindlessly listening to lectures as he wondered if he'd said anything to make her want to stop coming to the shop, to stop seeing him. More than a few times, he thought about dropping by the bookstore to see if she was just working.

Maybe she had a great excuse for vanishing, maybe she just...forgot about their unspoken morning deal, the one where he let her in early and gave her a few free snacks from the first round of baking.

On one rainy afternoon, he was jolted with the conclusion that maybe she'd gone on vacation and had just forgotten to mention it. But with a sigh he remembered that Max had come in just the day before, and she didn't say anything about any vacations.

On the ninth evening, when the final customer left the shop and the boys started to close down for the day, Mike had decided it was time to raise the subject.

"It's just...she hasn't come in for like...almost ten days. That's weird, right? She's been coming pretty regularly for like two months," he rambled on, a bit frustrated that his friends hadn't noticed her absence as much as he had. How could *anyone* not notice her?

"Huh, not like you're counting the days or anything, right Wheeler?" Lucas asked with a raised eyebrow.

"What? No! No, no I just...she's just...you know it's been..." he trailed off, flustered at his friends' pleased grins. "No. It doesn't matter, it's weird right?" Mike said, trying to get them to stop smiling so smugly at him.

Dustin broke first, "Yeah that's super weird. Max didn't mention anything odd when she came by the other day. You should run down to Hidden Paradise, see if she's working," He suggested, setting down a now-dry purple bowl.

It was all the permission he needed, "Really? Yeah, okay I'll be back in a bit," Mike said, sliding out from the table and hurrying to the door.

As he left, Mike caught Lucas's smug tone talking to Dustin, "See how fast he got out of here, I told you!"

He didn't hear Dustin's reply, already halfway down the street, his route to the bookstore now memorized.

Pulling the door open, he heard the jangle of the overhead bells,

indicating a customer was entering. Normally, her soft voice would ring out over the bookshelves, telling him she'd, "Be with you in a second!"

Today, there was nothing.

He paced up and down the aisles, running a hand through his dark hair as he made his way through non-fiction and cookbooks, between biographies and gardening books, past young adult fiction and textbooks, but he couldn't find her. The only thing keeping his hope alive was the fact he didn't see anybody *else* working.

She's gotta be here .

As Mike strolled in the direction of the register, he caught sight of movement out of the corner of his eye.

Her back was to him as she stood facing the true crimes section, marking down titles with the clipboard she held away from her chest.

Mike sighed heavily, walking slowly forward. He tried to make himself known as early as he could, as he knew El was a bit skittish, always flinching and wincing at loud noises.

"El?" He asked quietly, hoping not to frighten her. Despite his calm tone and slow approach, she jumped nonetheless.

She slowly turned around, pressing the clipboard tightly to her chest. As soon as he was close enough to see, he furrowed his brow and quickened his pace, trying to reach her as fast as he could.

"El? Holy shit, what happened?! Oh my god, El, are you okay?"

Her normally light and porcelain skin was marred by cuts and scratches. One deep gash ran on her forehead over her eyebrow, another under the opposite eye, making her cheek puffy and red. Several smaller cuts dotted her nose, chin, and cheeks. She gazed down at her sneakers, avoiding eye contact.

Mike's chest ached as his eyes ran over her, desperately longing to reach out and hold her face so he could inspect it and make sure she was okay.

“N-Nothing. It was an accident,” She responded quietly. El fumbled nervously with her clipboard, fingers thrumming along the back as she felt his eyes on her, embarrassment washing over her. Lifting a hand to pull the hair from behind her ear in an attempt to cover her wounds, El’s sweater slid down her arms, exposing the bandages she’d half-heartedly used to hide her injuries.

Mike’s stomach dropped, “Oh my god! Did someone...did someone attack you?” He moved closer, eyes swimming with panic. He reached his hands out, trying to hold himself back.

Her eyes rose quickly to meet his, shaking her head, “No! No, I just...um, a mirror broke...in my apartment, and I...I fell...into it.” It wasn’t her worst lie yet, but it wasn’t great.

Mike frowned, finally giving in to his temptations. He moved closer to her, reaching out and gently pulling her hand off the clipboard, stretching it out and peeling back the wimpy band-aids to see the injuries for himself.

“El, these are some pretty bad cuts. What did you do, go swimming in the broken pieces?” He joked, trying to make her feel more comfortable. Her lips twitched a bit, but the frown took over once more.

Mike ran his fingers slowly over her arm, checking each cut. It didn’t take him long to find a problem, “Oh shit, El, this one’s still got glass in it.” He moved his fingers up a bit further, “Fuck, and so does this one.”

She shrugged, as if this was no big deal, and his heart ached dully.

He let go of her arm and took the clipboard out of her hands, setting on the armchair nearby, “El, is it alright if we go take care of these? We have to get the glass out, or else it’ll...” He didn’t really know what else it would do, but it certainly wouldn’t be good.

El gazed up at him, at his concerned eyes and his focused, determined expression. She felt her heart skip as she nodded slowly.

Mike put a steadying hand on her back, guiding her away from the

bookshelf and towards a couch sitting in the corner of the store underneath a bright light.

He sat her down before leaving to retrieve a first aid kit, which she informed him was underneath the front desk.

As he returned, Mike sat opposite her on the couch, setting the first aid kit on his lap. He pulled out antiseptic wipes, tweezers, and bandages.

“Let’s do this arm first. Is that okay with you?” He asked softly, gesturing to her right arm. She nodded dully, outstretching her arm and rolling up her sleeve.

He took her arm gently in his hand, using the light overhead to help locate any small shreds of glass lurking in the gashes.

El stared at him as he worked, being so gentle and cautious with her, asking before pulling out glass, telling her exactly what he was doing. It made her heart ache, and in the back of her mind she wished he’d been there all the other times she’d been cut and bruised and hurt.

After a few minutes of steady work, Mike remembered why he was there in the first place.

As he applied the last bandage, switching over to her other arm, he brought up the question that had been plaguing him for over a week.

Trying to remain as casual as possible, Mike asked, “I-I haven’t seen you the past few days...where have you uhh, where have you been?”

El’s eyes fell to her arm, away from his questioning gaze. She suppressed a shudder as Brenner’s voice floated through her head again.

They don’t want you. He doesn’t want you.

She was thinking up a lie, some sort of ridiculous excuse to get out of telling the truth when he spoke up again.

“I missed you.”

Her disbelieving eyes whipped up to meet his, which rose slowly from her arm to her face.

“Y-You missed me?” El breathed. It fell out of her mouth without her permission, but she needed to hear him say it again.

Mike nodded sincerely, rubbing a spot of clear skin with his thumb, “Yeah...I missed seeing you every day. You were such a fixture of every morning, and then you were just...gone. That’s why I stopped by tonight...I wanted to check on you. You know, make sure you were okay,” He nodded to her arm, “Good thing I did, I guess.”

El stared at him in complete disbelief. She tried to wrap her brain around his words, stomach fluttering all the while.

He doesn't want you .

Yet, here he was, being as kind and as gentle as ever. Fixing her up and making her feel new.

It tumbled out of her before she knew it.

“I’ve just...I’ve been having a bad week, with just...with nightmares, and whatever.” He frowned, looking concernedly into her eyes.

“Nightmares?” He asked lightly, voice dropping.

She sighed, her eyes watering for what felt like the thousandth time this week. Trying to keep her voice from wavering, she continued on, “Yeah, um...the place that I grew up...th-the people who raised me...they were...bad. Bad people.”

Her voice unintentionally shook on the last words. Mike sighed, eyebrows furrowing in concern before shifting closer and wrapping his hands around her’s softly.

“It was...it was very scary, all the time. A-And I’ve gotten used to being okay now. To pretending it’s all okay at least. But...but sometimes,” her voice shook, and El couldn’t stop the tears from falling.

Mike squeezed her hands and moved closer still, his heart breaking as

she fell apart in front of him.

“S-Sometimes I can still hear him in my head...telling me how pathetic and worthless I am...and how no one w-wants me.” At this she broke, dipping her head down to hide her sobs from him.

Mike reacted instantly, finally closing the space between them and pulling her close to him. He wrapped his arms firmly around her, tucking her head under his chin but remaining careful of the gashes on her forehead and cheek. El hesitated, before slowly snaking her arm around his chest, gripping his t-shirt tightly.

They leaned against the couch, El practically sitting in Mike’s lap as she sobbed into his shirt. All her fear, all her pain, all her pent-up emotions flying free as she allowed herself to be held for the first time.

Mike was glad El couldn’t see how his own eyes were tearing up. He knew needed to be strong for her, every instinct he had, every bone in his body was telling him to just hold her for as long as she would let him. So, he gripped her tighter, *needing* her to know he was there and that he would always be there, that he wouldn’t let her deal with this on her own anymore.

They sat for a few minutes longer, Mike holding all of El’s broken pieces together as she let out everything she’d been holding in for so long. He rubbed a gentle hand up and down her back, mumbling that he was there, that she was okay.

Once her sobs settled down, her breathing coming out in soft whimpers, Mike whispered into the quiet air of the bookstore, “It’s not true, you know. That no one wants you. Max wants you, and the boys want you,” he brought a hand to her hair, running his fingers through it and brushing it back gently, “I want you.”

He felt her grip on his shirt tighten, “You’re a part of our lives now, you...you matter to us, El. You’re so kind, and you’re crazy smart, and you’re *funny*. Goddamn, you’re funny. And we all love having you around. Whatever voice is in your head, telling you otherwise is...is just *wrong* .” Mike sighed deeply as he felt her smile against his chest.

El pulled away, lifting her head up a bit to look him in the eyes. His heart broke once more as he saw the tear tracks lining her face. “D-Do you mean it?” She hiccuped, feeling as if her whole life rested in his answer.

He didn’t hesitate for a moment, bringing a hand up to cup her head gently, “Of course I do.”

She beamed at him, her lips tugging up into a small smile.

“Thank you,” she whispered, suddenly very aware of their close proximity.

He grinned back at her with a sad smile, “Now, let’s get back to fixing you up.”

After patching up her arms, Mike had taken a while checking out the deeper gashes on her forehead and cheek. He determined that they didn’t need stitches, but she should try resting her face so that the cuts could heal faster.

Of course, in the back of his head, Mike knew she probably *did* need stitches, but he was confident he could get Lucas to heal the cuts back up without her knowing. After all, Lucas had healed about a dozen of Dustin’s bumps and bruises since high school without him even realizing it.

El quickly closed up the bookstore, having stayed WAY past closing time unintentionally.

Locking the door and swinging her bag over her shoulder, El and Mike strolled together down the street back towards the coffee shop.

“Thank you again, Mike. I...I really appreciate, you know, everything,” El said shyly, not daring to look up at his face.

His chest swelled, grinning to himself, “Yeah, no problem. And hey, you know, if you have any more issues...any more nightmares...you can call me. I’ll pick up, and we can talk through whatever’s going on up there,” he knocked at her head gently, chuckling softly to hide

how his voice was shaking.

El smiled, gripping her bag tighter. She kept her head down, trying to hide how her cheeks were blushing.

“Thanks, I-I may take you up on that,” she replied softly.

They walked in a comfortable silence, and before they knew it, they’d arrived at A Coffee Shop once more. Mike turned to El, looking down at her with warm eyes.

“Alright, well, I gotta go make sure those bozos didn’t start another Mop Hockey game while I was gone, “ El chuckled, “So I’ll see you tomorrow? Bright and early?” Mike said hopefully, raising his eyebrows and smiling.

El laughed once more, nodding along, “Bright and early.”

Mike turned, opening the door to the shop, “Alright, well, bye El.” He lifted a hand to wave as she started to back away, “Call me if you need anything.”

“Will do. Thanks again, Doctor Wheeler.”

He laughed, making El’s head spin before he turned around, heading back into the shop.

El spun around and walked forward, wrapping an arm around herself and smiling gently. She thought only of the selfless boy who was quickly taking over her heart the whole way home.

Notes for the Chapter:

I just finished mapping out the rest of this story and oh my god...you guys are in for one hell of a ride. Anyways, here's this chapter that I wrote in one sitting because I'm in love with Mike and El more than Mike and El are in love with each other. Let me know what you think :)

9. Human Computers and Blanket Forts

“I mean, if you really think about it, we’re all just human computers made of meat,” Mike rambled on, passing her another book from the pile. El grimaced, nose scrunching up at the mental image.

“I mean...I *guess* you’re right,” she replied, climbing back up the ladder and sticking the book in its proper spot. “I still don’t like it though, knowing about all the stuff inside me, freaks me out.”

Mike laughed, lifting a hand up to make sure she didn’t fall as she came down, “All the ‘stuff’ being your internal organs and muscles and bones?”

El raised her eyebrows, smiling as she descended, “Yeah, in fact! All that stuff! I’d rather just not know about it!”

She grinned as he furrowed his brow in shock, “But...you can’t...I just...how could you *not* want to know about it all?! It’s how we’re all alive and how we function and-”

El cut him off, putting a steadying hand on his shoulder as she stepped off the ladder. Facing him, she lifted a finger and poked the lines where his brows knitted together in confusion. He relaxed his face and gave her a small smile.

“Mike, have I ever mentioned how much of a science nerd you are?” She teased.

He blushed, swatting her hand away, “Yeah, yeah, whatever. I just don’t get how you’re not fascinated by all this,” he gestured to the table where his abandoned anatomy textbook lay open to a graphic picture of a dissected brain.

El grimaced again, turning back to look up at him, “I don’t know, it’s just...me and science, we never really got along. It doesn’t make sense in my head, so why bother, right? Plus...I hate blood.” She grabbed onto the ladder, sliding it down the row. Mike frowned, following behind and pushing the cart of books along with him.

He'd come into the bookstore to study, figuring the calm atmosphere and lack of Dustin and Lucas would help him focus on his upcoming finals.

Definitely not because he knew El was working.

No, not at all.

Nevertheless, he gave up the instant she'd wandered over to his table, all grins and fluttering eyelashes as she asked him to help her out for a few minutes.

"How are you doing, by the way?" He nodded to her arms, which he knew still held a few band-aids.

El pulled her sleeve down, showing it off, "Much better! See, it's almost all the way gone! And these ones are almost gone too! No scars even!" She beamed, poking her cheek where the gash used to be.

Mike smiled back, trying to remain as innocent as possible.

In truth, after over an hour of convincing, he'd persuaded Lucas to secretly heal El up over the course of a few days. Lucas had refused at first, insisting it was a sure way to expose his powers, but once she'd come in and he saw the damage, he sighed and got to work. Through small touches and exchanges, Lucas had managed to mend El's cuts without her noticing anything unusual--as far as Mike knew, at least.

"That's great El," he said encouragingly, "Now we just have to make sure you don't fall into any more broken mirrors."

El nodded before dropping her gaze, avoiding his eyes, "Yeah, let's hope," she breathed, starting back up the ladder.

Her nightmares hadn't let up. Each night she would wake up in a cold sweat, heart thumping wildly, twisting her head around trying to figure out where she was. And though she hadn't broken any more mirrors since the first incident, El could feel herself closer and closer to snapping as the days passed.

Max tried to be helpful, she really did. She stayed up with El, left

lights on in the house, installed more security systems, she did everything she thought may help. But Max had her own demons to battle, as El knew very well, and it's hard to fight for someone else when you can't find the strength to fight for yourself.

Mike's words seemed to be the only thing that worked to help calm her down when she bolted up in a panic each night.

El had memorized them, the night he'd found her and held her and let her cry.

Whatever voice is in your head, telling you otherwise is...is just wrong .

I missed you.

Max wants you.

The boys want you.

I want you.

When she couldn't remember who or where she was, El forced herself to think of his words, of the brightness in his dark eyes, of the determination in his voice as he held her to him.

Sticking a book back in it's slot, El blushed thinking about that night. She remembered the way she felt with his strong arms wrapped around her, his chin resting on her head, the thump of his heartbeat as she pressed herself to his chest. She thought of his kind words and his gentle touch as he cleaned her wounds and seemingly brought her back from the dead.

Shaking her head, she reminded herself that it didn't matter. It couldn't matter.

El had read many books in the five years since her escape. She'd learned a lot about the world by reading the stories and words of others. She discovered friendships, families, happiness, laughter, pain, redemption...and love.

Love stories were her favorite. In her loneliest moments, when she felt stuck in this never ending cycle of running and hiding and lying,

El imagined what it would feel like to hold someone, to kiss someone, to love someone. To have someone love her in return.

Most of her longing came from the fact she knew she would never be able to do any of those things.

El Parker, El Stevenson, El Wilson; there had been an endless stream of fake names that she'd used over the years. Each one reminding her of who she could never be. She would never be normal, she would never be able to settle down, make a home for herself, fall in love. It just wasn't possible. Plus, it's not like anyone in any universe could possibly love a wreck like her.

Yet looking at Mike, she dreamed of a world in which it would be.

"Anyways, I know you've got your gross homework to get back to, so I won't force you to help me after this row," El joked, breaking out of her thoughts and reaching down to take the book from his extended arm.

Mike scoffed, passing the book into her outstretched hand, "First of all, not gross, interesting," he paused as he helped her climb down the ladder, "Second of all, you aren't forcing me to do anything. I like hanging out with you."

El blushed, shyly gazing up into his eyes. None of her books had ever been able to capture the weight she felt in her heart when she saw him. It was like she could physically feel him even when they were separated, like all of a sudden he was the only thing on her mind.

"I like hanging out with you too, Mike," she responded after a moment, her words heavier than she'd intended. He smiled down at her, eyes gleaming with understanding.

El turned back to the ladder, moving it along the tall bookshelf, "I mean only if I *have* to, though."

Mike scoffed in mock-offense, following behind her with the cart, "Wow! I'm wounded, what a heartbreaker," he passed up a book, "That's fine, it's fine, I'm fine, I don't care. I know where your true alliances lie, Dustin is *very* dreamy after all." Mike beamed as El

erupted in giggles, holding tight to the ladder to stay stable.

The bright light of the afternoon glow turned into a dim sunset as the day went on. Mike did eventually have to get back to studying, much to both of their dismays, but they both knew his final exams were approaching quickly, and he needed to do well.

El had heard it about a dozen times from all three boys, about how Mike was a top qualifier in his biology program and was being considered for a very prestigious internship. It all seemed very fun and exciting, but looking at him struggle for hours on end, staring blankly at his open anatomy textbook, El couldn't help but feel a little bit of pity.

Near closing time, as he was finally finishing his study guide, Mike had an idea.

After packing up his textbooks, he wandered over to El, who stood at the front desk turning off the computer system for the night.

She glanced up at him as he approached, "All done?"

Mike nodded tiredly, adjusting his grip on his bag, "For tonight at least, there's still a lot to do. But I'm at that point where, like, I'm so stressed out that I'm just calm."

El grinned, "I know what you mean. It's like...you feel like you're just this little ball of anxiety."

Mike laughed, leaning up against the front desk, "Bingo."

He watched as she fiddled with the computer, her tongue sticking out a bit and her eyes focused on the task at hand. In the back of his mind he knew he was staring at her, and he knew that was probably pretty weird. But she just looked so cute and he was just so tired, so he decided not to listen to his more rational side.

"Hey El?" She tore her eyes away from the screen to glance at him, "What're you doing after this?"

She gazed at him curiously, "After this? I'm gonna go home. Probably read. Try to sleep. Y'know, the usual."

“Do you wanna do...not that?” Mike grinned at her, eyebrows raised hopefully. His elbows were sitting on the top of the desk and he leaned towards her.

El turned to him, staring him down with a squinty eye, “I don’t know Wheeler...what do you have in mind?”

Two cups of soup, one train ride, a surprising amount of physical effort, and an hour and a half later, El laid outstretched on her back, pressed up against Mike’s side. They laid shoulder-to-shoulder, staring up with pride at the ceiling of their impressive blanket fort.

“I haven’t made one of these since I was a kid. How could I have not done this in so long?! This is awesome!” Mike whispered enthusiastically, lifting his long arm to poke the top blanket. He had no reason to whisper, as both Dustin and Lucas were out of the apartment for the night, but it felt appropriate.

El giggled, turning her head and squinting her eyes in the darkness to see him, “I’ve never made a fort before. It’s very cosy, like the rest of the world doesn’t exist.”

Mike nodded, smiling in the dim light, “That’s exactly what it feels like.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes, both revelling with satisfaction in their combined work. Mike’s living room was small, but they had used the best of their abilities create a space big enough for the two of them to squeeze in, as well as long enough so that Mike’s lanky legs didn’t poke out. It took all the chairs and blankets in the apartment and the better part of an hour, but El didn’t mind. Even with her stomach fluttering nervously, she was happy to just be spending more time with him.

After a few calm moments, Mike spoke up, “D’you want to put in a movie? It’s not too late yet.” He turned his head towards her, waiting for a response. Accepting her nod of approval, he shimmied out from under the fort and loaded up one of his favorites, *Running on Empty*.

Slotting himself back beside her, he pulled a spare blanket up over the two of them. El hummed appreciatively, snuggling in as the movie started.

Mike settled himself down beside her. The compact size of the fort forced them to lay right up against one another, pillows slotted behind their heads.

A voice in her head told El that this should feel weird, laying up against him, it should feel foreign and new and scary. But as El nestled further down, pressing her head against his arm, she couldn't help but feel an odd buzz of excitement mixed with a peace and serenity like she'd never felt before.

Mike on the other hand had never felt more nervous. He shifted his body, trying to make her as comfortable as possible in the dim light of the screen. All of a sudden, he felt hyper aware of every move he made, of every breath he took, of every time he flinched. Despite his restless mind, he couldn't help but think about how *right* it felt to have her so close to him.

In order to quell his nervous twitches, he decided to whisper plot points and small details in her ear. She hummed along and murmured small questions as the movie progressed, River Phoenix's character slowly falling in love with Martha Plimpton's.

At around the halfway mark, when Danny finally caved and confessed to Lorna all about his fake identity and how he'd been on the run his whole life, Mike glanced down to see El's eyes had closed, her eyelashes fluttering as she dreamed.

He smiled softly, gazing affectionately at the slight pout on her lips, the gentle slope of her nose, the curve of a smile that hadn't quite made it to the surface.

Wow.

It wasn't *just* the fact that she was extremely beautiful, no, El had a certain gracefulness about her. A kindness that Mike knew ran through and through.

He lifted a cautious hand, slowly bringing it to her forehead where a strand of chocolate hair lay haphazardly across her cheek. With a gentle touch, he brushed it back behind her ear, softly running his fingers across her jaw as his hand came down.

Mike felt her shiver against his arm, and he froze before feeling her move ever closer, lifting her hand from under the blanket and sliding it across his waist, snuggling into his side.

He smiled to himself, the darkness of the fort hiding his blush.

Grabbing the remote, he switched the movie off before sliding down a bit. He hesitantly leaned his head against hers as he yawned and closed his eyes, positively glowing with bliss.

"Worthless. Pathetic."

"Used. Damaged. Broken."

"He doesn't want you."

El's eyes shot open, her body jerking awake. Her heart thrummed wildly with fear as she breathed deeply, slowly lifting her eyes in the darkness, trying to figure out where she was.

Just as the panic started to set in, tears forming in her eyes, El felt something shift from underneath her. Calming her mind and steadying her rough breathing, El focused enough to realize she was gripping onto something. Or rather, someone.

She released her fist, which had been clenched tightly around the soft fabric of a t-shirt. Cautiously lifting her head, she squinted through the dim lighting, ready for whatever threat may be waiting for her.

Instead, her heart stuttered as she saw Mike's relaxed face resting above hers, his eyes closed and his breathing steady. El gazed up at him, her pulse starting to settle as she realized she was not in any immediate danger.

Just a nightmare. Just a nightmare. Just a nightmare.

El huffed thankfully, and as she exhaled, she began to register the weight of two strong arms wrapped around her back. Butterflies erupted in her stomach as she realized her legs too were tangled up in Mike's long ones.

She let out a heavy sigh, setting her head back down on his chest and taking hold of his shirt once more. El felt his arms tighten around her as he shifted from underneath her, moving them a bit so that they were pressed even tighter together in the blanket fort.

This meant something, she knew it, but she was too tired to think about it. Choosing instead to just enjoy the warmth of his arms and the calming rise and fall of his breathing.

His sleepy voice echoed through the night, "I got you...it's okay...you're safe..."

At his words, El felt her eyes drop once more, heavy with sleep. She snuggled in deeper to his chest, listening to the steady thump of his heart.

Before she knew it, she was asleep once more.

Notes for the Chapter:

Much like Mike, I too am so stressed out that I'm just calm.

Anyways, I hope you like this one, it made me feel all warm and fuzzy just writing it. Also, please do enjoy these nice, sweet moments while they last. You've got about three more chapters until shit hits the fan.

Please tell me what you think!! I won't know unless you tell me!!

10. The First Hint

The rough pitter-patter of rain against the windows woke her slowly the next morning.

El squeezed her eyes shut, burying her face deeper into her pillow in attempt to block out the unwelcomed noise. She hummed as she thought of the wonderful dreams she'd been having, although as the soft beams of hazy light danced across her vision, she couldn't quite remember what they had been about.

Snuggling deeper in her bed, El sighed and squeezed her arm tighter around her pillow, trying to pull it closer.

She expected to feel the soft fabric between her fingers. She expected to fall back into a deep sleep, unbothered by the rain.

However, she didn't expect the pillow to squeeze back.

El's stomach flipped and her eyes shot open as she realized she was *not* in her bed and what she was snuggling with was *not* her pillow.

It was Mike.

Memories flooded her brain as she recalled the events of the night before. Yucky brains and comfy forts and sweet movies and...and *Mike* .

El felt frozen against him as she realized the intimacy of their positions. She remembered laying her head against his shoulder, and she vaguely recalled waking up pressed against his chest, but she didn't remember doing *this* .

They were on their sides with the fuzzy blanket draped up to her shoulders. El's head lay under Mike's chin, her face resting against the hollow of his neck. Both of her hands were balled up against his t-shirt, and as far as she could tell, they were the only things keeping her from being completely pressed up against him.

His legs were entangled with her own, the warmth of the blanket keeping their socked feet from facing the cold air. El could feel Mike's

strong arms holding her close to him as they lay draped around her. She felt one hand wrapped up in the back of her sweater, gripping the fabric gently. The other hand lay near her head, as if he'd fallen asleep playing with her hair.

El's heart raced as she suddenly realized she had never been this close to another person before. Though she'd been hugged and touched many times in the past, El had never in her life been held like this. Anytime she was approached with any sort of physical closeness, she always felt a wave of nausea run through her. Closeness only brought on knives and needles and pain and pain and pain and pain.

But laying there, with Mike's warmth radiating onto her, with the soft rise and fall of his breath blowing gently into her hair, El couldn't find a trace of fear. In fact, she couldn't think of a time when she'd been more comfortable, when she'd felt so sound, and safe.

How could that possibly be?

How could this happen when she felt pieces of her horrific upbringing everywhere she went? When she saw Brenner's face in every man on the street? When she felt the sharp pinch of the needle every time an icy breeze cut across her cheeks? And worst of all, when she saw bits of Will in each one of her friends?

How could she lay here with Mike and feel so safe and secure when the rest of the world reminded her only of the worst parts of her life?

The hint of an answer, just the smallest bit of an idea popped into her head, but she dismissed it as fast as it had come. It just wasn't possible.

As she thought of any other explanation, El quietly pressed herself deeper to him, splaying her palms against his broad chest.

Just because she didn't understand didn't mean she wanted it to stop.

Fate had other plans though.

Just as she closed her eyes again, determined to live in his warmth for as long as possible, the thunderous boom of an endless knocking

echoed through the otherwise peaceful apartment.

El's breath hitched and she jerked roughly, clasping her hands tightly around Mike's shirt in panic just as his eyelids shot open. They sat for a beat, breathing heavily, trying to get a sense of their surroundings, of this obnoxiously loud knocking. El slowly lifted her gaze up to his and they locked eyes, staring at each other for a moment. Mike gazed down at her, his mind wide awake as he took in their close proximity. In his alarm, his grip on El's shoulders had tightened, pulling her up closer to where his head sat as a result.

They lay only a few inches apart, breaths mingling together hastily. El's heart was beating beating beating and she couldn't stop it and she *knew* it wasn't because of the noise coming from outside the fort. Mike's eyes stayed locked on hers, and her breath stuttered as she watched them turn from alarmed to what she could have sworn was only soft and...and happy.

The moment was broken by another round of harsh knocking at the door. Mike sighed and slowly swung his gaze outward, releasing his grip from around her back as El freed her own fingers from his t-shirt.

Untangling his legs and crawling out from under the blanket fort, Mike ran a hand through his crazy hair and mumbled about how Dustin had probably forgotten his keys. El followed suit, slowly wriggling out from under the blanket and making her way out into the living room, trying all the while to steady her pounding heart.

She felt oddly disappointed as she left their cozy refuge, as if she had just been forcibly evicted from her own personal oasis. El straightened up, pulling her sweater sleeves over her hands and wrapping herself up in the blanket from under the fort.

Mike ambled to the front door, where the knocking hadn't ceased.

"Dustin, calm down, dude, I'm coming," he said, his voice raspy with sleep.

El shivered at the frigid air, shifting her gaze to where the rain remained pounding against the windows of the living room.

Just as she was wondering how she was going to get home with such harsh rain, El heard Mike swing the door open.

Max's frantic voice echoed through the apartment, "Mike! Have you seen El? Is she here? She didn't come home last night, and she didn't call, and...and she knows to call, and I just-just...have you seen her?"

El spun around and hurried from her spot in the living room into the door's line of vision, guilt pooling rapidly in her stomach.

Shit, shit, shit, shit.

She had completely forgotten to let Max know where she was going to be that night.

Max let out a deep sigh as she shifted her frantic eyes from Mike's bewildered ones to see El hurrying towards the front door, "Oh my god, El. Fuck, you can't do that to me!" She walked into the apartment, throwing her arms around El's shoulders as soon as she was close enough.

"Max, oh my god I'm so sorry! I completely forgot, I'm so sorry, oh my god...I'm so sorry," El felt the redhead release her from the hug, gripping her shoulders and facing her.

"You know the rule! Don't scare me like that! I thought they might've found you, or that you were taken again or that-" Max cut her own rambling off abruptly, both of them realizing with a flash of panic that Mike was still standing in the doorway, watching their interaction with flustered expression etched into his sleepy features.

Max gaped for a minute before continuing on, "Just...don't do that again. I'm too old for it."

El laughed, glad to release the tension, "Max, you're twenty-two."

Max sighed, throwing her arms back around El's shoulders, hugging her again quickly before releasing her once more, "Twenty-two going on eighty."

Mike ambled over to where the two girls stood, deciding it was his moment to speak up. They turned as he approached.

“Max, I’m so sorry, it was totally my fault. I asked if she wanted to watch a movie and it got late and I guess...I guess we just fell asleep and-”

Max lifted a hand, cutting him off, “It’s alright, loverboy, it was an accident, I get it.” Mike and El both blushed furiously at the nickname, stomachs flipping and ears turning red.

If Max noticed their guilty flustering, she didn’t say anything. Glancing up from where she’d been staring at her toes, El spoke up, “We should get going though, you know, before the rain gets worse.”

Mike nodded along, running a nervous hand through his messy hair, “Oh yeah! Yeah for sure, here let me help you get your stuff.” They hustled about the living room, gathering up El’s bag and grabbing her shoes.

As they made their way to the front door, El knew she couldn’t just...leave. So, she took a leap and reached up to took hold of Mike’s arm, keeping him back. He turned and met her eyes, a questioning grin sliding on his face. Max stopped, turning to see what the holdup was, and as she did she caught a glimpse of El’s eyes pleading into her own. Max raised her eyebrows, skeptical, but got the hint, mumbling about how she’d be waiting outside.

El smiled gratefully as she left, turning back to Mike. Her bravery was waning, nerves taking over again, bubbling in her stomach more than ever before.

She beamed up at him, taking note of how cute his hair looked when he woke up, curlier than normal and sticking up in all directions.

“I just wanted to say...I had a really good time. Y’know, movies and forts and all. It was really nice,” she said, her eyes twinkling. El rolled forwards and backwards on the balls of her feet, swaying nervously.

He grinned back at her, wringing his hands together, “It was pretty fun, huh? Blanket forts are my specialty!” Mike laughed nervously, “Hey, I’m really sorry about the whole Max thing. If I’d known I would’ve made sure you got home last night, or at least planned

ahead for it to be a sleepover.”

El smiled up at him, and he was sure his heart stopped beating, “No, it’s...it’s my fault. We have a deal, and I broke it,” she explained. Nerves flooded her stomach, “And...the sleepover...the sleeping...the sleeping was...very nice,” El winced as the words came out, not *at all* sounding as smooth as they did in her head.

Nevertheless, Mike’s lips twitched up, his dark eyes boring into her gentle ones, trying to tell her everything he wanted her to know.

“Yeah,” he whispered, a blush running up the back of his neck, “the sleeping was really nice.”

A beat passed in which the same air from before, the tense, nervous atmosphere from under the blanket fort, settled between the two once more.

El’s feet moved of their own accord. As she gazed up at him, she took a small step forward, entering his space. He took her step as an invitation, he himself moving a fraction of an inch closer. Her head only came to where his shoulders began, but as she moved closer El tilted her gaze up, following his eyes with her own.

Mike followed her lead, not wanting to pressure her or make her do anything she didn’t want to. But as she moved closer, as her honey eyes glazed over with something he couldn’t describe, he didn’t think he’d be able to hold back much longer.

His eyes flickered to her lips, so rosy and sweet and *beautiful* . He leaned forward, tilting his head down, drawing her closer.

Heart hammering away, she too leaned towards him, pulling herself closer and closer and closer until...

“El! You coming?” Max’s bossy voice broke the moment, and the two jumped away as the door swung open, her red hair falling in pieces out of her ponytail.

El lifted a hand and brushed a lock of her own hair behind her ear, “Yeah! Yeah, yeah I’m coming,” she walked slowly towards the door before turning back around, sending a very flustered-looking Mike a

soft smile, "Bye, Mike."

He stood bewildered in the same spot, face flushed, staring at her longingly as she walked away.

As El closed the door, she turned around to see Max's crossed arms and raised eyebrow.

"I think we need to have a chat, young lady."

Max allowed for their talk to wait until they got home, giving El the sliver of hope that maybe she'd forget, or that she'd be too tired. But as soon as the door closed behind them, Max sat down at the kitchen table, scooting a spot out for El to sit in.

Hesitantly, El sat down, avoiding Max's eyes and choosing instead to pick at a loose string on her sweater.

"Do you love him?" El jerked her shocked eyes up to Max's expectant ones, surprised at the bluntness of the question. El dropped her hands, tugging at the string nervously.

"I-I-I...what? What do y-you...what do you mean?" She stalled.

Max was not to be deterred, however, "I mean...do you love him?"

El stared, wide-eyed and flustered, "Do I love him? Do I love...who?" She tried.

"Don't play dumb with me, El," she rested her arm on the table, "Mike, do you love Mike?" El blanched at her, picking faster at the sweater string. She started tapping her foot against the tiled floor, wanting nothing more than to be swallowed up whole. Before she could come up with any *sort* of answer, Max spoke again.

"I know you like him, I see the way you look at him, the way you light up when he's in the room. You forgot to *call* last night because you were with him. You like him and that's...that's fine, but is it something we need to really... *talk* about?" She said the last words softly, like she was afraid they would explode if she wasn't careful.

El furrowed her brow, not understanding the question.

“I don’t...I don’t know what you mean...”

Max sighed, setting both of her hands in her lap, “Look, El...you...you know the situation. We don’t know how long we’re going to be here, how long it will be before we *have* to leave again. It’s okay to make friends and to have crushes, to enjoy the best in life, cause god knows you fucking deserve it...but...” Max trailed off, gazing apologetically at El, “But...love is different. Love is deeper. Love will hurt more if you have to leave it behind.”

El flushed deeply, her stomach twisting in knots. *Leave it behind* .

She imagined a world in which she’d have to leave her friends behind. In which she’d have to leave Mike behind. Tears sprouted in her eyes as she imagined their faces, day by day turning from sadness to betrayal as she failed to turn up at A Coffee Shop or at their movie nights, as she failed to be part of their lives, leaving with no explanation whatsoever.

El imagined Mike’s face if she completely disappeared, his hurt, his pain, his confusion. Her stomach lurched as she thought of how *she* would feel if Mike suddenly disappeared from her life. She wrapped her arms around her waist, holding onto her arms as she avoided Max’s gaze.

Max’s eyes pleaded into hers, “So...do you love him?”

El thought of his kind eyes, of his soft smile, of his radiant light. She’d never met anyone like him before, she’d never allowed anyone to get so *close* to her before, both literally and figuratively. Over the months that she’d gotten to know him, Mike Wheeler had squeezed his way into her whole life. He took up every thought, every emotion, every part of her being. The thought of leaving him behind...it...it *hurt* .

“I...I don’t know,” El whispered, glancing up through watery eyes, “I just...I want to be with him all day long...a-and I trust him and I love talking to him and seeing his smile and hearing him laugh,” she was breathing rapidly, the words tumbling out of her mouth faster than

she could process them, “Max, he’s...he’s got a really good heart. And I think...I think Will would have loved him, and I don’t know what to do about all of it.”

Max sat grinning sadly in her chair, gazing at El with understanding eyes. They sat in silence for a few minutes, letting all the unspoken words float between them. After a while, Max nodded to herself, the gears turning in her head.

“Okay.”

El glanced at her, confused, “Okay?”

Max nodded, “Okay. If you trust him, then we’ll do our best to stay for as long as possible. We still can’t tell them about us, though, you know that. It’s too dangerous, and I don’t want to get them mixed up in our world. But I’ll do everything I can so that we can stay.”

El smiled gratefully, grasping onto one of Max’s hands with her own and squeezing gently.

“Thank you.”

Max squeezed back, “Make it worth it, El.”

“You’re telling me you invited El over to make a blanket fort , *just* so that you guys could watch sappy ‘80s movies and hang out? And then you both *innocently* fell asleep together?” Dustin questioned before aggressively tossing a popcorn kernel into the air and catching it in his mouth. Mike scowled at him, already regretting telling him about last night. He was about to interject when Dustin spoke again, “Dude, just ask her out. Make a move, do something, *anything* .”

Lucas grunted in agreement, “You’re killing us here, Mike. If you ask her out, she will say yes. She looks at you like you gave her the sun,” he took a sip of his drink, leaning up against the counter, “I swear you two are the only ones who don’t know that you like each other.”

Mike raised his hands in protest, “Oh trust me, I *know* I like her. And I do have kind of a plan in the works, it’s just...I don’t know, it’s

complicated,” he argued.

Dustin tossed up another piece of popcorn, missing this time, “What’s complicated? You like her, she likes you. Now, you ask her on a date, bing, bang, boom, you win!”

Mike ran his hands through his dark, floppy hair, “It’s not that, it’s just...I think something’s going on with her...and with Max, something they’re not telling us.” The other two boys frowned, furrowing their brows. They looked at him expectantly, waiting for him to continue.

After a beat, Mike went on, “Well, like this morning, Max came by and she was all panicked because she couldn’t find El anywhere. And when she found her here, she said something like, ‘I thought they found you, I thought you were taken again’.”

Dustin and Lucas sat forward, alarmed, Mike was glad to see they were also shocked by this news, “Right! That’s weird, right? And I don’t know, it’s none of my business, but it just...it sounded so... *scary* coming from Max because she’s usually so...so stoic and realistic.”

They sat for a moment, going over his words in their heads.

Lucas spoke up, breaking the silence, “But...who would be after them? And why?”

Mike shook his head, trying to come up with an answer, “I don’t know. But I want to find out.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Get ready...the next chapter sets it all off.

11. The Calm

“Try refreshing it again.”

“Dude, he just refreshed it!”

“Well...try again!!”

“What’s that gonna do?!”

“Maybe they literally *just* updated it! Refresh again!”

Mike rolled his eyes and huffed before pressing the reload button again. When nothing new popped up on the screen, he and Lucas both shot ‘I-told-you-so’ looks at Dustin, who pushed his sleeves up and walked closer to the counter where Mike sat with his laptop.

“Let me try. You know I’ve got the magic touch,” he said, spinning the computer around.

El furrowed her brow from her spot on the barstools between Max and Mike, “Magic touch?”

Lucas sighed as he peered over around Dustin’s shoulder, “Yeah, Dustin claims to have the ‘magic touch’ when it comes to computers and technology and stuff. That he can make anything work for him just by asking it nicely.”

“I do and I can! It’s my superpower! Just watch and wait!”

El shot a knowing look at Max, who smirked in an effort to suppress a laugh.

The five of them were crowded around Mike’s computer, waiting impatiently for the email telling him if he’d been accepted to the prestigious internship he’d been working so hard for. The coffee shop was quiet, almost completely empty save for the bustle of the morning crowd that was dissapating. Chilly rain pounded the windows, soaking everyone outside.

Winter had come with a fury this year, and El couldn’t get enough of

it. She and Max had never lived in a city where winter was so cold and rainy, they'd always been in states where winter meant sixty degrees and sunny. El found this new weather extremely liberating and fresh, and she decided she loved it almost immediately.

As she listened to Dustin and Lucas bicker about the former's ironic 'superpowers', she glanced at Mike sitting beside her. He didn't seem to be able to hear them arguing, instead sitting with a blank expression on his face, jiggling his leg up and down and wringing his fingers together nervously.

El sighed in sympathy before reaching over and taking hold of his trembling hands. She wrapped his fist up in hers, rubbing the top with her thumb. Mike breathed out and glanced up at her, smiling shakily before intertwining their fingers under the counter.

El felt her stomach flip as she squeezed his hand lightly. She knew how much this program meant to Mike. He'd been studying day and night for months in order to get the grades he needed to qualify. It drove her crazy seeing him so tired and exhausted every day, literally living off of coffee and caffeine as he balanced school and work. El desperately wanted to wrench Mike's textbooks away from him and force him to take a nap (maybe, selfishly, preferably *with* her, but that was beside the point). Mike was running himself ragged, and it was killing him. But if he got in, if he made it, she knew it would all be worth it.

"Dude, your stupid superpower is NOT working!" Lucas exclaimed, yanking the computer away from Dustin, "Let me try!"

Dustin let out a huff, "I was a second away from making it work! The stupid WiFi in here is doing that thing again where it just shuts down for no reason! It's making it lag!"

"Are you bozos done arguing? Come on, give it here, I know exactly how to make it work," Max said amusedly, reaching forward and tugging the laptop forward. As she spun it around, she nudged El in the side, mumbling under her breath and asking for a slight distraction.

El got the hint, nodding minutely. With the boys' focus on Max, El

pulled up just a bit of her powers, tilting her head slightly and causing the stack of plastic water cups to clatter to the floor behind the counter.

As Dustin and Lucas spun around, jumping from the sudden noise, she saw Max close her eyes and press her palms to the laptop's keyboard. El felt a small wave of energy shoot out from beside her, but as soon as it had come, it went away, Max opening her eyes and adjusting her grip on the computer.

"There, I fixed it," she said simply, running a hand through her crimson hair. Dustin and Lucas turned back around, bewildered expressions etched into their faces.

"What?! How did you-I just-"

"I warmed it up for you!" Lucas exclaimed, shoving Dustin in the side.

El giggled as they sputtered before glancing over at Mike, who was staring at her with wide eyes, his mouth agape. She felt her heart drop, a flash of panic rolling over her.

He hadn't seen that, had he? The cups distracted him too, right?

Hesitantly, she decided to try and play it off, smiling and squeezing his hand, still sitting entwined with hers under the counter.

There was no way he saw anything. No. He's just nervous about the internship.

"You alright?" She murmured, hoping to break him out of his stupor. Mike blinked at her, seemingly coming out of deep thought.

"What? Oh, yeah. Yeah, I'm fine," he said unconvincingly, starting to jiggle his leg again. He switched his focus, looking over at Max who was still grinning at Lucas and Dustin's dumbfounded stammering. They had spun the computer around and were grumbling about the stupidity and lack thereof of Dustin's 'superpower'.

"Hey Max?" Mike asked, his brow furrowed. She looked over, "How'd you do tha-"

"It's up!!" Lucas shouted suddenly, causing El to flinch at the sudden noise. Mike whipped his head around, his face paling. He clutched El's hand tighter, his questioning gaze dropping in an instant and being replaced with one of blank trepidation.

"...Well?" Mike croaked out, "What does it say?"

El could *feel* his nervousness radiating out of him, anxious butterflies dancing in her own stomach as she stared at Lucas. The apron-clad boy tapped on the laptop, clicking buttons and scanning the screen. Suddenly, his eyes shot up, a grin taking over his features.

"You got it!!"

The four of them erupted in cheers, jumping out of their seats and running around the counter as Mike slumped in his seat, laying his head on the counter and collapsing with an enormous sigh of relief.

A chorus of, "You did it!!" and, "Yes!!" and, "Nice job Wheeler!" rang out through the coffee shop, the only customers present looking up in alarm at the sudden noise as they packed their things to leave.

Mike sighed and lifted his head off the counter, a wide, unabashedly happy grin spreading across his face. His eyes crinkled as he laughed, Dustin and Lucas pulling him up off his seat and into a massive hug. They embraced for a long while, the two boys slapping Mike's back enthusiastically, mutters of congratulations spilling out endlessly.

As they broke off, Max ambled over, knocking him on the shoulder affectionately, "Nice job, loverboy," she grinned, an eyebrow raised in amusement.

"Thanks, Max," he smiled back, lifting a hand and running it through his floppy hair.

She gave him a more genuine smile, "But seriously, congratulations."

Mike nodded back in thanks just as she walked over and clasped her hands on Dustin and Lucas's shoulders, muttering about celebratory drinks and pulling them back towards the kitchen.

El stood grinning, swaying on the balls of her feet as Mike turned

around to face her. They locked eyes and El felt her heart flutter as she saw his smile reach his eyes, making them shine and positively glow with happiness. Something flashed across his face, some kind of wonderful mixture of elation, relief, and affection. And before she knew what was happening, Mike was moving towards her.

El's heartbeat hastened as she gazed up at him through her eyelashes, lifting her arms up with the intention of wrapping him in a hug. She opened her mouth, the beginning of a congratulations on the tip of her tongue.

However, El's heart stopped *completely* as Mike gently set his hands on her jaw, leaning down and finally, *finally*, pressing his lips to hers.

El stood in absolute shock for a beat, her head spinning and mind reeling as his lips rested softly against her own. Warmth quickly flooded through her body as she realized what was happening, what this was. Slowly, she lifted her hands and placed them where Mike's rested on her jaw, clasping on gently and rubbing her thumbs against the back of his hands. El raised herself up on her toes, pushing her body closer up against his and molding her lips tenderly against his, returning the kiss enthusiastically.

She was positively buzzing, feeling as if she could fly, a blissful weightlessness taking over her being. Mike was kissing her. He was *kissing* her. Mike was kissing *her* .

None of her books told her that *this* was what it was like. Nothing she'd ever known had prepared her for the thrumming of her heart, for the soft push of his lips, for the trembling joy in her mind.

As quickly as it began, it ended. Mike slowly pulled away, a shuddering breath leaving his lips as they both slowly opened their eyes. El sighed at the dazed and disbelieving expression on his face, knowing she was probably wearing one of her own. His lips twitched up, and he leaned down to press his forehead against hers, hands still softly placed along her jaw.

El closed her eyes and smiled in complete contentment, her head still spinning and humming and blurring. Slowly, she released her slight grip on his hands, sliding her arms up and around his neck. Moving

her head to the crook of his neck, she closed the remaining distance between them, pulling him firmly against her. He dropped his hands down to her waist, wrapping them around her middle and lifting her up off the ground as they embraced tightly.

She smiled hugely against his neck, her lips still buzzing, "Congratulations, Mike." El felt his grip tighten as he shuddered against her, breathing out heavily.

"I can't believe that just happened," Mike mumbled into her hair.

El laughed against him, wrapping her fingers into the soft, dark hair at the back of his neck.

"Which part? The internship or... *that*?" She asked nervously, her voice shaking a bit.

Mike pulled back, releasing his grip and setting her back on the ground, keeping his hands resting loosely on her waist. El kept her hands placed on Mike's shoulders as their eyes locked once more, both glimmering with joy and affection. Slowly, she lifted her index finger off his shoulders and traced the soft freckles spackled across the bridge of his nose and onto his cheekbones.

Mike smiled sweetly at her, eyes crinkling, "Both."

El blushed a deep red, the same warmth as before flooding from her head to her toes. Just as she opened her mouth to reply, the nearby bustling sounds of Dustin, Max, and Lucas brought her back to reality. They burst through the kitchen door, glasses and bottles in hand.

Dropping her hands, El turned around in Mike's grip. His hands were burning through the skin of her waist as he kept them in place, giving her enough room to spin around in his embrace so that she was now facing the group. Not daring to speak for fear of her brain shutting down completely, El felt her face flush again as Mike set his chin down on the top of her head.

"We don't have any champagne, because I guess coffee shops don't sell alcohol or something, so this'll have to do for now!" Dustin

exclaimed, all three of them setting the glasses down along with what appeared to be regular apple cider.

El felt the hum of his voice against her head as he replied, "That's perfect. This is perfect. You guys are amazing, seriously."

Lucas scoffed as he helped Max pour the glasses, "We're amazing? Dude, you just got picked out of *five hundred* applicants! You're a fuckin' rockstar!"

El set her hands against his on their spot around her waist, squeezing them tightly.

She leaned back and beamed up at him, "You're a *rockstar*," she joked in mock-awe. Mike scrunched his nose at her, grinning madly.

Max finished pouring the glasses before passing them out to the group, raising an eyebrow slyly as she noticed Mike and El's positioning.

"To Mike," she said, lifting her glass, "And his enormous nerd accomplishment!" The group laughed and clinked their glasses together before happily sipping away.

After a few minutes of conversing and celebrating, Dustin set down his glass, frowning.

"This doesn't feel right," he said, furrowing his brow.

"What do you mean?" asked Mike, taking another sip of his cider.

"I *mean* that you've been dreaming about this program for what? Like seven years? Ever since Mr. Clarke told you about it way back in middle school!" Dustin explained.

"Yeah, I know, it's pretty crazy," Mike said, still evidently confused.

"SOOO, this is a major goal you've just accomplished! It's worth *way* more than some cheap apple cider we found in the back of the fridge!" El winced and took the glass away from her lips, suddenly not so confident in her friends' pick.

Lucas seemed to be picking up on whatever it was that Dustin was trying to say, excitedly asking, “You’re not suggesting what I think you’re suggesting, are you?”

Dustin turned to him, smiling coyly.

“Dude, do you mean...” Mike trailed off, smiling from his spot behind El. She turned in his arms, a questioning look painted on her face.

“What?” She asked, exchanging puzzled looks with Max.

“Cabin time!” Dustin exclaimed. Max and El raised their eyebrows, still not sure what that meant.

Lucas was quick to explain, “Dustin’s grandpa owned this cabin up north for like fifty years, and when he died he left it to Dustin. Stupidly.” Max laughed, causing Lucas’s lips to twitch up. “Dustin’s never had complete ownership of it, thankfully, because of a bunch of legal stuff, but we used to go up there *all* the time.”

Dustin nodded excitedly, “The cabin is in the middle of the woods and there’s this cute little town nearby that has a bunch of markets and bars and stuff! Plus, during winter it gets super snowy and blustery!”

El beamed at her friends, anticipation building up in her stomach, “Snow? Like, real snow?” They all nodded at her enthusiastically, speaking over one another about how deep the snow would sometimes get.

Mike broke through their rambling, “Yeah, but do you guys want to tell them why we haven’t been in awhile?”

This cut them off, Dustin and Lucas suddenly staring at each other nervously, wringing their hands together. Mike continued on, “These two geniuses broke not one, but *two* windows during a snowball fight the last time we were there. Dustin’s mom was so pissed, she told us we weren’t allowed back for like two years.”

El laughed, staring at her friends, easily able to conjure the image in her mind.

“Well it’s been two years! And this is a big deal, so...let’s celebrate! We can leave the day after tomorrow and stay through the weekend!” Dustin exclaimed before glancing at El and Max for confirmation.

El looked over at the redhead, fully knowing this decision wasn’t up to her. Max would have to decide it was safe for them before they did anything, that was just the rule. They met eyes, and El shot Max her best pleading look, pursing her lips and fluttering her eyelashes. Max rolled her eyes and turned on her chair in order to face Dustin.

“Where is this place?” She asked.

“On the outskirts of this little town about two hours north of here,” Lucas answered, giving Max his own set of pleading eyes. She furrowed her brow and sat quietly, the cogs in her brain turning.

Mike squeezed El’s waist as she watched Max debate the pros and cons of going in her head. El flushed and smiled gently, the ghost of his kiss still very much on her mind. Going up and visiting this cabin sounded really fun, in more than a few ways. The more she thought about it, about the snow, and about the town, and about Mike, the more she was dying to go.

Finally, after nearly five minutes of silent contemplation, Max sighed, sarcastically rolling her eyes, “Okay fine, I guess we can go.”

The group jumped up in cheers, happily rambling on about all the activities they wanted to plan, and the food they’d need to get, and what they’d need to pack.

After a while, El turned her head and glanced up at Mike, who looked down and caught her gaze, smiling sweetly. He squeezed his arms around her waist once more blushing furiously.

El grinned back softly, very excited for what this trip would have to offer.

Notes for the Chapter:

I have been looking forward to writing the next chapter for SO long. Get ready, it's a doozy.

Thank you to everyone who comments and

everything and tells me what they think. It means the absolute world, and I'm so thankful for each of you.

12. The Storm

Notes for the Chapter:

Before you read this chapter, I want to let you know that it's hella long, lol sorry I had to fit everything in. Also, please, please, please watch the music video for Ed Sheeran's song Perfect before you read. It sets the scene and gives you the ambiance that I want to capture in certain parts of this chapter. You'll know the ones. Enjoy :)

"I'm sorry, Mike. I just-I can't tell you. Please, *please*, try to understand," El begged, tears pooling under her eyes. The cold air bit at her cheeks, turning them bright red. She backed away, her heart breaking with every snowy step. Mike followed behind her, eyes wild and mind buzzing, his pulse racing as the freezing wind whipped his dark hair around.

"El, whatever it is, *whoever* that was, we can help! *I* can help!" He pleaded, gloved hands outstretched. She wanted nothing more than to reach out and grab on. She wanted to hold him for as long as time would allow, to kiss him and hug him and *be* with him. But she knew she couldn't.

"Mike...I-I'm so sorry. I never should have let us get this far. These things just can't happen to me, they just...can't. They don't work out, and...and," El's voice shook, "...and I don't deserve it," she sobbed, finally letting the tears flow free. "I don't deserve you."

Mike took another step forward, panic seeping into every part of his brain. His stomach dropped at the steely resolve of her voice, at the sad determination painted on her soft face.

From further away he could hear Dustin and Lucas laughing as they began to cross the icy street leading up towards the cabin, Max following behind them.

"Please...El," he pleaded, his voice shaking. Mike didn't know if it was from the cold or from the alarm he felt ringing through his body,

“Please, I-I *can’t*.”

His begs were cut off by a terrifying shout coming from the street.

“LUCAS, LOOK OUT!!” Dustin screamed, and both El and Mike whipped their heads around to see what was happening.

They looked just in time to see the truck barreling down the street, skidding and sliding uncontrollably on the black ice.

Just in time to see Max frantically run and push Lucas out of the middle of the road.

Just in time to see the truck slam into Max’s body.

Just in time to see her thrown to the ground, bleeding and unmoving.

Ten Hours Earlier

The soft flakes flew past the window as El gazed out, gently pressing her palm against the freezing glass. Mike watched her with soft eyes from his spot on the couch. He grinned as she pulled her hand away, the chill of the window evidently a little too cold to touch. He stared in wonder as she peered up at the white sky, blanketed with clouds and spilling out snowflakes by the thousands. He could tell she was awestruck, enraptured by the snow falling silently outside the warm walls of the cabin.

The group had arrived that afternoon, having spent the last day and a half scrambling to pack and put all the supplies together. Dustin had spent a solid hour on the phone with his mother, begging and promising that this time nothing would be damaged and nobody would get hurt. It took a lot of convincing, but he’d eventually gotten her to agree and send him the keys to the cabin.

They’d piled themselves into Lucas’s small car the next morning, bags crammed in every available space, not leaving much room to move around. El had been shoved to the middle seat in the back because as Dustin claimed, she was the smallest and they needed to, “Maximize space!”

Max had then claimed shotgun up front next to Lucas, much to

Dustin's protests.

"You can't just *take* shotgun!" He'd complained.

Max just stared at him, an eyebrow raised, "But I just did."

Her tone dared him to fight her on this, so Dustin had looked to the other boys for help. Lucas just put his hands up in seeming surrender, mumbling that he didn't mind it being first come, first serve.

Mike didn't say anything, content in his seat pressed up next to El, even though his long legs were a bit cramped.

He still couldn't quite believe he'd kissed her. Taking that step was *by far* the ballsiest thing he'd ever done. It was just that he'd been so caught up in the moment of excitement, in the whirlwind of nerves and energy, and she'd just looked so *beautiful* and kind and happy, that he'd finally given into his impulses. It was bold and brash for sure, but as his mind flashed back to the soft press of her lips, to her nimble fingers clasping his hands, to her glowing eyes gazing up at him, he couldn't help but feel thankful that he'd done it. Who knows when he would've felt that kind of courage again?

Neither of them had really said anything about it since it happened, but they'd both become increasingly affectionate towards one another. El was always reaching for Mike's hand, intertwining their fingers softly and rubbing her thumb along the side of his palm. Mike in turn loved to drape his long arms over El's shoulders, holding her close to his chest and placing his chin on top of her head. They'd also taken to hugging goodbye and hello rather than just saying it.

Mike wasn't complaining about these small changes at all. No, he was really quite enjoying himself. But he hadn't gotten a moment alone with El since their kiss to properly ask her out, or to tell her...to tell her that he was falling in love with her.

The realization had hit him like a train as he went to sleep the night after the kiss happened. Dozing in his bed, not quite asleep and not quite awake, Mike thought only of El's soft wavy hair, of her alluring smile, of her quiet kindness, of the way she looked at him, of the way he *knew* he was looking at her. His eyes shot open in the dark room

as he realized that his infatuation was much more than a crush. No, it had progressed into something bigger, something grander than he'd ever experienced before.

Mike continued to replay their kiss over and over in his mind that night, wanting to remember each moment and every detail with as much clarity as he could recall.

That was when the second realization of the night had struck him.

Mike was ruminating about how nervous he'd been about the internship, and about how his friends were arguing over the stupid computer when he remembered what he'd seen.

His eyes had widened as the memory came back to him. After everything with El that day, he'd been so worked up that it had completely escaped his focus. Mike sat up in bed as he tried to work through what he'd seen.

He had no way to prove it, no way to replay it in order to see it clearer, but Mike could have *sworn* he saw El jerk her head to the side *the same moment* the cups behind the counter had collapsed, seemingly without reason. Mike remembered glancing over and seeing Max's closed eyes as she pressed her palms flat against the laptop's keyboard, and then all of a sudden, the WiFi had been fixed.

In the dark light of his room, Mike had furrowed his brow, trying to piece together what he had seen, *if* he had seen anything at all. He rehashed the scene over and over in his brain, trying to figure out if there was anything to piece together at all. He had no proof, and no real reason to think anything was odd, but he had a gut feeling that this wasn't nothing. And with that confusing thought, he'd drifted off to sleep.

The trip up had taken a few very painful, very musical-filled hours. Dustin was shocked to learn that El and Max had never heard of the musical *Wicked* before, and had insisted on playing the best songs off the soundtrack. It wasn't until forty-five confused minutes later that Max mentioned they'd never seen *The Wizard of Oz* either, and had

absolutely no context for any of it.

As they traveled further north, snow began to appear on the ground beside the road. At this sight, El had hastily scrambled to the window, leaning over Mike in order to get a better look. It wasn't exactly like she'd imagined it, all dirt-covered and muddy, but Mike assured her it was because this snow was just near a road, so it naturally got kind of gross. She'd sighed, a bit disheartened but trusting his words, hoping the cabin would be the winter wonderland she'd dreamed of.

It certainly didn't disappoint.

After rolling through a quaint little town covered in Christmas lights and decorations, Lucas pulled up to a charming wood cabin surrounded by large snow-covered trees. It sat very isolated from the rest of the world, not another house in sight. Sharp icicles stuck out across the roof, aiming for the heaps of powdered snow below. El had scampered out of the car as soon as it stopped, eyes wide and unblinking.

Mike stared in awe as she took a few cautious steps forward, slowly lifting her arms to the air as soft snowflakes drifted down from the sky, dotting her dark, wavy hair.

El spun around, beaming at them, her button nose already turning red, "It's snowing!" Mike laughed at her childlike amusement, stepping out onto the icy ground and pulling El's discarded scarf along with him. She'd taken it off a while ago, once the car got too hot and stuffy.

Mike grinned, ambling up to where she stood and wrapping the crimson scarf back around her neck, "It's also freezing. C'mon, let's get our stuff inside before we turn to ice."

The cabin wasn't very big, only making room for the essential necessities. As they opened the front door, they were greeted with a quaint living room containing a couch and some chairs circled around an old TV, a wood-burning fireplace in the corner. A ladder leaned up against the side of the wall, leading up to a small loft located above the living room near the roof. Two bedrooms sat on

either side of the house, a kitchen and a bathroom located near the back.

Since there was limited space, it was decided that Max and El would share one bedroom, Dustin and Lucas would share the other, and Mike would take the loft.

He'd protested initially, arguing that this whole trip was in celebration for *his* accomplishment. But Dustin was quick to remind him that the last time they'd come up to the cabin, he'd had a bedroom and Lucas had taken the loft, and the time before that, Dustin himself had been in the loft. So, really, it was only fair that it was Mike's turn in order to stick to the rotation.

They spent the next hour unpacking and enjoying the heat of the comfy cabin. Mike couldn't help but notice how El kept wandering to the small windows and peering out at the falling snow, her hazel eyes glowing in wonderment. From her reaction, he guessed that this was the first time she'd ever been in snow. For some reason, this brought a smile to Mike's face. He wanted to show her *everything* there was to see in the world, he wanted to give it all to her.

By late afternoon, Lucas suggested they go into town for the night in order to grab some food at the holiday market and hang out.

After piling on a mountain of layers, the group headed out, deciding to walk as the town was only a little ways down the road.

Mike walked ahead with Dustin, chatting about the holidays and the coffee shop and anything that came to mind really.

"Hey, so what's up with you and El? Anything new to report?" Dustin questioned. Mike's stomach flipped and he glanced backwards to see if anyone could hear them. El, Max, and Lucas were a little ways back, taking their time and laughing about something ridiculous, so he decided he was in the clear.

"Well...we've been getting closer in the past few days, I guess," Mike answered, carefully avoiding telling Dustin about the kiss. For some

reason, he wanted to keep that to himself for now.

Dustin scoffed, "Yeah, trust me, we've all noticed how much 'closer' you guys have gotten."

Mike frowned, glancing over at his curly-haired friend as he rubbed his cold hands together, "What do you mean you've all noticed?"

"Uhhh, let's see. You two can't seem to keep your hands off of each other, always touching in this way or that. And I mean, you both did this before, but I swear you guys can't be in the same room without staring at one other like you'd given each other the friggin' moon." Mike blushed deeply as Dustin rambled. He hoped the redness in his cheeks could pass off as being from the cold, because in truth he'd never felt warmer.

"Yeah, well..." He trailed off, not really knowing what it was he wanted to say.

The five of them wandered through the small marketplace when they'd arrived in town. Buying snacks and drinks from various food stands and moseying about happily. The snowfall had increased slightly, and they were hearing reports of a harsher storm coming later this evening.

El had clasped onto Mike's gloved hand with her own as soon as she caught up to him. Yes, Max and Lucas were fun to chat with, but they only seemed interested in talking with each other these days. So, El decided to catch up to the person she *knew* would want to hang out with her. And she was right, as soon as she neared his tall frame, Mike spun around and gave her his full attention.

They strolled through the town slowly together, El feeling her cheeks burn as Mike took his hand out of hers and instead wrapped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her close to his side.

After a little while, they looked back and found that they had been separated from the rest of the group. Mike immediately sensed El's panic and was quick to reassure her that he knew the way back to the cabin if they couldn't find them again tonight.

The sky turned dark and the snow kept falling, falling, falling as Mike

and El meandered around the town. They went in and out of shops, stopping at holiday windows and admiring the gorgeous lights that were strung up.

“I’ve never seen anything like this before,” she revealed as they made their way closer to the town center. Mike frowned, pulling her tighter to his side.

“What? Like the snow and the lights?” He asked.

El nodded, “All that and just...Christmas...and...fun, and holidays, and traditions and... *everything*. ” Her breaths came out in soft whispers, the chill of the air apparent in every word she said. Mike sighed sadly, furrowing his brow as he remembered what she’d said about how she grew up in a bad place, with bad people.

“The people you lived with before...they didn’t let you celebrate holidays or anything?” He inquired as they walked. She shuddered against his side.

“No. There was no fun.” El whispered in a steely voice, her eyes blank and her mind clearly very far away. Mike felt his heart sink as he saw her visibly recoil from the memories.

He squeezed her shoulder, “Well then, we’ll just have to make up for it this year,” Mike responded, smiling softly down at her. She grinned forward, reaching the arm that wasn’t around his back and sliding it around his stomach.

As they neared closer to the middle of the town, Mike and El began to hear the soft sounds of music playing around them. A band was holding a small concert just a little ways up the street, a crowd of dancing people swaying gently to the songs.

Mike glanced down and saw how El was staring longingly out at the crowd. He smiled to himself, pulling her forward, closer to where the band was playing.

He dropped his arm from around her shoulder and turned around to face her. El smiled questionably at him, not fully understanding what he was doing. Mike extended a hand, his eyes sparkling at hers.

“El, would you like to dance?”

Her eyes darted from his hand to his eyes, her heartbeat picking up.

Dance?

El’s lips twitched up and she nodded slowly, taking his hand and allowing him to lead her to the edge of the crowd.

With a nervous breath, Mike pulled her hand to his chest, wrapping his other arm tightly around her waist. El lifted her hand and placed it on his shoulder before sliding it up to tangle in the hair at the back of his neck.

The snow fell softly around them as they swayed to the music, gazing at each other with so much affection, so much unspoken love.

El’s heart was about to beat right out of her chest, she just knew it. The world faded away and it was just Mike. Just him, looking at her and holding her close and giving her what she never thought she would have. Butterflies pounded in her stomach as they swayed to the soft music. She felt like she was going to throw up, but in the best way.

Mike’s floppy hair fell across his forehead, snowflakes dotting the dark strands. Slowly, El pulled her hand from behind his neck and brushed it across his forehead, pushing the hair back gently. He trembled against her, smiling softly.

“You’re incredible,” he whispered. She flushed, suppressing a grin.

“You aren’t too shabby either,” she retorted, gazing up at him through her eyelashes.

Suddenly Mike stopped swaying, freezing on the spot with such determination in his eyes.

El furrowed her brow slightly, “You alright?” She asked. He only beamed down at her, radiating with happiness.

“I’m more than fine,” he murmured. “Can I ask you something?”

El's stomach dropped, suddenly nervous in a whole different way. Mike didn't wait for her answer. Instead, he wrapped his arm back around her small shoulders and led her out of the crowd, needing to find somewhere more private.

As they walked back through the town, El's mind jumped anxiously to whatever it was Mike was going to ask. She worried that he was going to ask certain questions that she couldn't answer.

They stopped in front of a small general store, the lights shut off for the night. The snow had picked up around them, the chilly wind biting their skin. Mike dropped his arm from around El's shoulders and turned to face her. She let out a nervous sigh as he took her hands in his, gazing down at her determinately.

"El," Mike hoped she couldn't hear how his voice quivered, "I-I want--no, I *need* to tell you that..." He took a deep breath. "That I..." *Spit it out dammit!* "Th-That I'm in love with you!"

El's eyes widened, her heartbeat pounding in her ears. She froze in front of him, her mouth gaping as she took in what he said.

In love....with...with me?

How could this kind, generous, handsome boy be *in love* with her? He was...he was everything light and good in the world, so unburdened by what life had to offer. He was everything she wished her life could have been, everything she wanted to know.

A deep feeling in her gut told her that this wasn't right, that he was too good, too pure for her dirty hands. That there was no way he could be telling the truth.

But looking up at his warm, dark eyes, she could only see complete adoration and honesty.

A spark formed in her heart. A hope that maybe, maybe this was where she was meant to be.

He was where she was meant to be.

El knew she loved him too. She'd known since the first time he'd

walked into the bookstore. From the first word they'd spoken to each other. From the first touch, the first hug, the first kiss.

She closed her gaping mouth, lips pulling up tepidly into a smile. Mike *loved* her. He loved her. And she loved him. And that was all that mattered.

Just as she opened her mouth to respond, the door to the general store banged open. They both looked over at the woman who emerged, clearly not knowing she was interrupting kind of a big moment here.

She was small, with mousy brown hair pulled back in a low bun. There were dark, *dark* circles under her eyes, like she hadn't slept in years. A frown painted her face as she fumbled with her keys, still not noticing Mike and El standing outside.

Once she locked the door, she stepped further into the light and El felt her heart stop completely, her breaths picking up rapidly and her vision swirling.

She knew this woman.

She'd seen this woman a hundred times before.

In the visions Will had showed her of his life before he was taken.

El felt like she was going to collapse on the spot as Joyce Byers turned around, jumping as she finally saw the two standing outside.

"Oh! Sorry kids, didn't see you there," she smiled grimly, "I'll just...get out of your way. Happy holidays!"

El just stared wide-eyed as Will's mother, his beacon of hope, his person, walked away into the night.

An enormous wave of guilt washed over her, and tears began to build up in her eyes.

How could she be so stupid? How could she live this...this fake life. This life where she got to be happy when Will was *dead* and his mother didn't know. How could she live with herself, brushing her

first friend under the rug in favor of these new friends? How could anyone love her when she was so inconsiderate and damaged and thoughtless? How could she have been so naive and *selfish* and stupid and self-centered to think that she could escape everything she left behind?

Mike, not knowing what had just happened and still focused on his own confession, turned back to El, who was standing completely in shock. He furrowed his brow and followed her gaze to where the general store woman was walking away.

“You okay? Did you know her?” El’s eyes shot up to his, and his heart dropped as he saw the panic, the guilt in them.

She dropped her hands from his, disgusted with herself.

“I need to leave,” she choked out, dashing past Mike and running to the edge of the town in the direction of the cabin.

Mike spun around, horror filling his mind. He’d said it too soon. He told her he loved her and she clearly didn’t feel the same and now everything was ruined. Something in his gut, though, something told him that his confession wasn’t what made her run. No, it was something to do with that woman.

He sprinted after El, his feet trudging through the snow, trying not to slip.

“El! Wait! El!” He shouted, his longer legs helping him catch up as they crossed the street to the hill near the cabin.

El turned around, her face stricken and her eyes pained and burning.

“What happened? Who was that? What’s...what’s going on?” He exclaimed, breathing heavily.

El’s heart dropped, her breaths coming out in quick wisps. Mike deserved an explanation, the biggest explanation in the world. But she couldn’t give it to him.

“I’m sorry, Mike. I just-I can’t tell you. Please, *please*, try to understand,” El begged, tears pooling under her eyes. The cold air bit

at her cheeks, turning them bright red. She backed away, her heart breaking with every snowy step. Mike followed behind her, eyes wild and mind buzzing, his pulse racing as the freezing wind whipped his dark hair around.

“El, whatever it is, *whoever* that was, we can help! *I* can help!” He pleaded, gloved hands outstretched. She wanted nothing more than to reach out and grab on. She wanted to hold him for as long as time would allow, to kiss him and hug him and *be* with him. But she knew she couldn’t.

“Mike...I-I’m so sorry. I never should have let us get this far. These things just can’t happen to me, they just...can’t. They don’t work out, and...and,” El’s voice shook, “...and I don’t deserve it,” she sobbed, finally letting the tears flow free. “I don’t deserve you.”

Mike took another step forward, panic seeping into every part of his brain. His stomach dropped at the steely resolve of her voice, at the sad determination painted on her soft face.

From further away he could hear Dustin and Lucas laughing as they began to cross the icy street leading up towards the cabin, Max following behind them.

“Please...El,” he pleaded, his voice shaking. Mike didn’t know if it was from the cold or from the alarm he felt ringing through his body, “Please, I-I *can’t*.”

His begs were cut off by a terrifying shout coming from the street.

“LUCAS, LOOK OUT!!” Dustin screamed, and both El and Mike whipped their heads around to see what was happening.

They looked just in time to see the truck barreling down the street, skidding and sliding uncontrollably on the black ice.

Just in time to see Max frantically run and push Lucas out of the middle of the road.

Just in time to see the truck slam into Max’s body.

Just in time to see her thrown to the ground, bleeding and unmoving.

Everything else faded away as El jerked harshly, her eyes wide and horror-struck. A scream ripped through her, but she couldn't hear it, she couldn't hear anything. Vaguely, she felt Mike's arms wrap around her middle, holding her up and keeping her steady.

A terrifying, endless beat passed in which it was only El and Max. It was only them and nobody else and Max was *dead* just like Will and she couldn't do anything because there was nothing else.

The beat ended, and the world slammed back into view. Dustin and Lucas were scrambling over to where Max lay motionless in the street. The truck that had hit her had swerved along the road, but had continued on despite the crime it just committed.

El felt Mike quickly dragging her limp frame down the hill again, towards Max.

As they neared, El felt her vision sway as she saw the irreparable damage that had been inflicted. Max had a deep gash running along her forehead, blood spilling into her crimson hair. Her arm was bent backwards, and El felt her stomach churn as she saw the glint of bone peeking out. Max wasn't breathing, her chest concaving unnaturally and her legs twisting up.

El collapsed next to her friend, sick to her stomach, gaping in shock.

Her friends panicked voices filtered in and out through her ears.

"Fuck! Holy fucking shit! Fuck!"

"Oh my god, Max! Max! Max wake up, Max!"

"We need to get her to the hospital!"

El jerked her head up, locking eyes with Dustin, who was pressing a hand against her forehead, trying to stop the blood.

"N-No...no hospital, we...we can't go there," she said, numbly.

Dustin stared at her incredulously, "Why not?? El, she needs to go to the hospital right now!" He panicked, eyebrows furrowed in confusion.

She didn't know where the words were coming from, she couldn't feel them, or anything.

"W-We can't go to hospitals because they ask for identification. We don't have enough background for convincing identification. They would catch us," she recited, miraculously remembering what Max had said to her over a year ago when she cut her knee and needed stitches.

The three boys stared at her, shocked and horrified and confused.

Mike spoke up first, his voice shaking. El could vaguely feel his arms wrapped around her.

"Lucas, do it. There are no other options."

El furrowed her brow and looked up at the dark-skinned boy, not understanding what was going on. Lucas sat static for a moment, staring down at Max's limp form.

He looked up, an unmistakable determination set in his sharp features.

"Okay."

El flinched as Lucas pressed a heavy hand on Max's deformed chest, closing his eyes and breathing deeply.

"What are you doing?! You're hurting her more-" She began to beg, but she stopped speaking abruptly as she watched in absolute bewilderment as Max's chest straightened up against Lucas's palm with a sickening crack.

Max suddenly shot up and took in a sharp breath, her eyes blaring open and gazing up unfocused.

El's heart jumped and she let out a scream, flinching back against Mike's side.

"W-What the *hell* ?" El gasped, eyes wide. She darted her head between the boys. None of them seemed as shocked as she was. She peered at Lucas, still pressing his hands against Max's chest with his

eyes slammed shut.

A drop of blood started to spill out from his nose, and she began to understand.

Lucas moved his hands from her chest to her forehead, and El watched in fascination as the blood began flowing *back* into the wound, before sealing up and shutting completely. He pressed his fingers against her arm, and slowly the bone started pushing back into place, returning to its regular form.

Lucas addressed every area in which Max was injured, taking his time to heal each spot meticulously. El gaped at him, her mind running a mile a minute.

As he finished, El gazed down in amazement as Max's breathing returned to normal, her eyes shutting and her body weak.

Dazed and astonished beyond belief, El glanced up through watery eyes to look at Lucas, who was sitting back on his hands, exhausted.

"You're like us."

Notes for the Chapter:

Welcome to Act Two.

13. Take My Hand

“You’re like us.” El whispered again, quieter this time, more to herself than to Lucas. All three boys were staring at her, dumbstruck.

“What do you mean, like you?” Lucas asked hesitantly, starting to lean forward on his hands. The blood had stopped dripping out of his nose, instead pooling on his lip.

Before she could say anything, before she could *think* anything, a low groan sounded from the ground below.

Max was blinking wearily, her eyes unfocused and glassy. She began mumbling incoherently, moaning and wheezing as she tried to sit up. El fell out of Mike’s grasp, pulling her friend up into a tight hug.

“Max! Oh my god, Max,” she cried, “Don’t you ever do that again!”

Max whimpered painfully, her arms weakly wrapping up around El. Ice cold wind whipped at their skin, the storm steadily picking up.

“Shit, we’ve got to get her to the cabin,” Dustin exclaimed, breaking them all out of their stupor. El leaned back, swiping at the tears dotting her cheeks.

“Max, can you stand?” Lucas asked, leaning over her. El couldn’t remember when he’d done it, but he was claspings onto Max’s hand tightly. Max gazed up at him, still foggy-eyed.

Gripping onto his hand, she pulled her legs up, sitting forward slowly. Lucas and El helped her up but as soon as she got to her feet, she began swaying, her eyes drooping.

“Max!” El cried as the redhead collapsed again, her breaths faint and low.

Before she could drop to the icy ground, Lucas lurched forward, wrapping his arms around her back and heaving her into his arms.

They all set off in one swift motion, trudging through the thick snow and making their way to the cabin. No one spoke on the trip up, all

too consumed in their own pressing thoughts. Tears stung El's eyes as she followed in Dustin's footsteps up the hill, the wind and snow howling around them.

They made their way into the cabin, not bothering to take their shoes or coats off. Lucas hurried to the couch, setting Max down gently before grabbing onto her hand and kneeling down beside her. Mike and Dustin busied themselves in the kitchen, setting a pitcher of water on the counter and getting food ready for whenever Max woke up. Completely awestruck, El watched from the entryway as Lucas closed his eyes and pressed his other hand against her forehead.

Max's chest had cracked *back* into position, her breathing had started up again, her bone had shoved back into her arm. El had seen that, she *saw* that happen. She saw *Lucas* do it. There were no other explanations, somehow he had done it. He was one of them, he had powers. Healing powers, she could only guess. But powers nonetheless.

Her heart began to race as she thought of all the implications, of the possibilities, of the extreme precautions they'd taken to hide their own powers when the whole time he'd *been* one of them.

She gazed at Lucas as he opened his eyes again, sighing deeply and brushing Max's hair back.

El wondered how he'd escaped the facility, how he'd managed to get fake identification and enroll in school when every step of their own journey had been so difficult. Her mind felt whiplashed, like everything she'd known was being turned on its head.

Slowly, El took off her extra layers, tossing them carelessly to the floor. She wandered over to the couch, taking a seat by Max's feet.

"Is she okay?" She croaked, not daring to look at Lucas.

He nodded, "Yeah, just passed out. It was just...uh...it was just a lot for her body to take in."

He let the words sit for a moment before he stopped brushing at Max's hair, glancing up at El from his spot on the floor. Out of the

corner of her vision, she noticed that Mike and Dustin had made their way over to the living room, still staring at her wide-eyed.

“El?” Lucas asked. She met his dark eyes with her own. “What did you mean I’m, ‘like you’? Can you...do what I do?”

El dropped her gaze, cursing herself. The pounding of her heart against her ears sparked more tears in her eyes, her breathing becoming short and panicked. She shouldn’t have blurted it out, that was a mistake. A mistake that she shouldn’t have made. A mistake that Max wouldn’t have made had their positions been flipped.

What was she supposed to do now? Could she tell him? Could she tell *them* ? Was she even allowed to?

El wrestled with the options in her head, all the while staring at Max’s sleeping form. There was no way to get around it. She couldn’t just *lie* , and even if she could, she was terrible at lying. She couldn’t just brush it off as if it were nothing. And honestly, she didn’t want to. She wanted to know more about Lucas’s powers, she wanted to know about his experience. And more than anything, she wanted to stop hiding. She wanted Dustin, Lucas, and especially Mike to know about everything.

The only thing drawing her back was the danger associated with letting them in on the truth. She loved her friends, she *loved* Mike, and if they got hurt because of her idiocy, she wouldn’t be able to live with herself.

The boys were still staring at her expectantly, she had been quiet for too long. Swallowing her fear, El decided to make Lucas go first.

“I-I’ll tell you, if you tell me first,” she said quickly, meeting his eyes.

Lucas bit his lip, “...Okay.”

He moved to the chair adjacent to the couch, leaning his elbows onto his knees. Dustin and Mike followed his lead, sitting down on the ground.

“I-I don’t know *how* it happened, or *where* it came from, but I’ve always been able to...heal people. To fix them when they’re hurt.” El

nodded kindly. She'd put that much together on her own, but it was good to hear him say it. "It can be tricky sometimes...depending on how fresh the injury is. If I can get to it quickly, like with Max, there are pretty good chances that I can heal them completely. But when a few hours, or a few days go by...it's...not as easy. " He stopped, wringing his hands nervously.

Dustin butted in, "Yeah, just the other month, he healed a big-ass cut I had on my hand! And look! No scar!" He scooted forward, proudly showing off his scarless hand.

Lucas grimaced, "Thanks Dustin. Well, for the most part, I try NOT to use it as much as possible. Cause...y'know..." he gestured with tight lips.

El winced, she knew exactly what he meant, and she knew how hard it was to talk about. So she decided to help him along a bit.

"I do. How old were you when you were taken?" She cajoled encouragingly, her voice soft. Lucas furrowed his brow, sitting up quickly.

"Taken? What do you mean, taken?" He asked, alarmed. Frowning, she stammered for a moment, confused as to why he was even asking.

And unbelievably, for the first time, it occurred to El that maybe not *everyone* with powers had been kidnapped or abused or manipulated. Maybe there were people out there with special abilities who had lived their whole lives without fear of torture or suffering, who had flown under the radar, who had gotten away with normal lives. Hell, one of them was sitting right in front of her.

Her words caught in her throat as she felt the injustice of it all hit her once more. The weight of her baggage pushed down harder on her shoulders. Anger and pain and fury and hurt flared in her heart, encompassing it completely.

As she stared out from her spot on the couch, El's breathing picked up rapidly.

Why was it me?

She quickly pressed a shaking hand to her chest, unable to catch a breath.

How come I couldn't have been normal?

Her face flushed and she began to see spots.

Why was I persecuted, abused, manipulated?

Her head spun and she wanted to cry and it wasn't fair, it wasn't fair, it wasn't fair.

"El!"

Suddenly, Mike's concerned eyes were all she could see. They were filled with so much panic, so much worry. Vaguely, she felt his hands clasp onto her shaking arms, fingers rubbing gently against the sleeves of her thin, pale pink sweater.

"Mike..." It came out a whisper in between her scampered breaths. Her eyes darted around his face wildly, and then she couldn't do it anymore.

El collapsed into Mike, allowing him to reach his arms up and pull her down into his embrace. She pressed her face to the crook of his neck, wanting--no, *needing* for it to all go away. For it all to be different and okay and not scary and not painful and fair and fair and fair and fair.

"Hey, shhh...hey, I got you. You're safe here, *no one's* going to take you," Mike assured, whispering softly in her ear. Her rapid breaths began to slow as she felt the tightness of his grip, the steadiness of his heartbeat. They sat for a few minutes as El calmed down, fully aware the other two boys were still in the room.

Nevertheless, pulling back, El glanced up at his warm, caring face. Through burning eyes, she observed the spattering of freckles along his cheeks, the blatant concern in his furrowed brow, the look of worry in his gaze, and all of a sudden she felt her heart calm, feeling more for him than she'd ever be able to articulate.

She slowly sat back, swiping at tears she didn't know had fallen. Moving to sit next to Mike in front of the couch, she settled her anger and her nerves, not quite feeling ready enough to tell them everything, but knowing they deserved answers. Before she could say anything though, Mike was reaching for her hand, grasping on tightly.

"El, you don't need to tell us anything."

She glanced up at him, her eyebrows knitting together. Lucas lifted a hand, clearly trying to interject, but Mike continued on before he could.

"If you aren't comfortable telling us, if it makes you feel unsafe. If it actually does put either you or Max in any danger, if you don't *want* to, you don't have to. It's up to you." El blinked dazedly at him, her heart squeezing at the total devotion in his voice.

"But, if you do choose to tell us, whatever it is, I want you to know that you can trust us. With anything. We're pretty good secret keepers," he shrugged his shoulders proudly. "I mean, we've managed to keep Lucas's secret for almost a decade now. Even *I'm* impressed with us." Mike laughed, breaking the tension slightly. El squeezed his hand and smiled at him, at this remarkably kind and considerate boy.

"I-I do trust you. All of you. A-And I know Max does too," she looked over at Max's still form. "You guys deserve answers, you deserve to know...to know the truth." El's eyes danced between the three boys, all staring at her in trepidation.

"Okay. Okay. Well, I guess...the first thing you should know is that..." She took a deep breath, "...Is that Max and I, we're...we're like you, Lucas. We can... *do things*, too."

El grimaced, bracing for their reaction. Three excited gasps broke through the silence of the room.

"Holy shit, you guys can heal people too?!" It was Dustin, grinning from ear to ear across from her.

El smiled lightly, “No, we can’t do that. We both have different abilities.”

“No way! What can you do? What can Max do?” Lucas exclaimed eagerly. El’s lips twitched up, surprised at their excitement.

“Max...Max is really good with technology, we’ll say. She can just...touch machinery and computers and stuff and make it do exactly what she wants it to do. And she can, like, download technical information to her brain, I guess. She does that a lot nowadays.” El cracked a smile as she watched Lucas’s mouth gape open, Dustin and Mike following with similar reactions.

The three of them burst into chaotic excitement, all talking over each other, trying to ask questions and find out more.

“Wait wait wait,” Mike grinned from next to her, “The other day, when the WiFi at the coffee shop was messing with my computer, when Max reached over to fix it, did she...was she using her powers then? To fix it?” He asked enthusiastically.

As El nodded in confirmation, Mike lifted his hands and ran them through his floppy hair.

“I knew it!! I knew I saw something!! There was something weird about that and I thought I was going crazy but,” El smiled at his adorably excited animation. “But wait, then...does that mean that before she fixed it, with the cups...” Mike trailed off, gawking at her.

Without saying anything, El turned her gaze to where the pitcher of water sat on the counter. Instead of responding, she focused her eyes wearily and felt her powers pull up from deep within, allowing her to lift the pitcher as well as a cup and bring it closer to where she sat. It floated gracefully through the room, past where Dustin and Lucas sat opposite the couch and into her waiting, outstretched hands. She heard them gasp and without missing a beat, El grabbed onto the pitcher and cup and poured herself a glass of water, hiding her grin as she took a sip, beaming at their awestruck faces.

“Holy shit,” Mike said breathlessly, staring stunned at the pitcher in her hand. “You can...you can move things...with your *mind* ?!” His

eyes widened as she nodded.

“Holy shit. Oh my god, *holy shit*,” Dustin marveled. Lucas just sat back, completely dumbstruck.

El smiled, actually enjoying herself. She knew though, that the rest had to come out too. “I can also find people. Find things. They were...much more interested in that.” She frowned, floating the pitcher and cup back up to the counter. Dustin and Lucas stared as it went by.

Mike took her hand again, pulling it into his lap encouragingly. The three boys peered at El as she tried to get the courage she needed to continue on.

“Th-The next parts are...not as fun.” She said, scowling to herself. They frowned, but didn’t try to interrupt. El sighed deeply, “My name...my *real* name isn’t Eleanor. The El is...is short for Eleven. Subject Eleven, I guess.” She felt Mike flinch beside her.

“W-What?” He asked as she glanced up at his concerned face. She grimaced, all of a sudden feeling very passive and transparent.

“Or, I guess if you go back far enough, my name was once Jane Ives. I don’t remember that though. That was before I was taken.” By the lack of badgering, she guessed they were done asking questions for now. Instead, the three boys sat back wide-eyed as she let her explain it all.

“I don’t remember when it happened. Probably soon after I was born. But I was...taken by this...organization...this facility. It was called the Department of Energy, or at least, that was the fake name for it. They never gave me a name beyond Subject Eleven. And I was...I was kept there until I was sixteen.” El shuddered as the memories started pounding at her brain, keeping her eyes trained on the carpet in front of her. The snowstorm continued to howl outside the confines of the cabin.

“The people who ran the organization...they were, they were *cruel*. Cruel, and...and wicked. They forced me to go on ‘missions’ to find people or to find things. They made me use my powers when I didn’t

want to, on things that I didn't want to. It never mattered if I was exhausted or starving. Those were only motivators for me to work harder. Hunger, sleep deprivation, isolation, beatings...torture. It was...it was *awful* . They did whatever it took to use my abilities."

Without meaning to, El began to itch at the spot under her ribs where a particularly nasty scar was burned in from their tasers.

"It was horrible. But...it was all I knew. That is, until Max and...and Will came along." El glanced up at Max's resting form, laying still and quiet on the couch. "They sent us out on combined missions. Will...he could mess with brains, connect us, bring us together in this...place to work as a team. It's hard to explain..." She trailed off, trying to get through the information as quickly as possible.

"Anyways, Max and Will, they saved me. Really and truly, they saved me. Told me what the real world was like, showed me unsolicited kindness, became my first friends." She smiled grimly at the memories.

"Then one day, Max found a way for us to get out. She didn't hesitate, taking the first shot she was given, she got us all out. Well...almost all of us," El's chin wobbled as she thought of Will's kind eyes, the same as the ones she'd seen in his Joyce Byers tonight. "Will...Will didn't make it." She whispered. Mike squeezed her hand tightly in his.

El turned to Lucas, "You were right to hide your powers. Because I'm sure that if you were on their radar, they would have found you and taken you too." His eyes were wide with shock. Slowly he nodded, seeming further away in his mind than normal.

"Max and I have been on the run since we escaped five years ago. We've lived in a half a dozen cities, with an endless stream of fake names and identities. Before you guys, we'd never made any friends, or told *anyone* the truth. But...I'm glad we did. I trust you guys, and...and I know Max does too." She ended her long explanation, sighing deeply.

Hesitantly, El lifted her gaze, terrified to see the boys' reactions. She fully expected them to be disgusted, uncomfortable, and disgruntled

with the truth. But as she looked up, she only saw their horror-stricken wide eyes, filled with sympathy and sorrow.

Glancing over slowly, El turned to look at Mike. He had tears flowing steadily down his cheeks, his eyes rimmed-red and shocked. He looked like he'd been hit by a train, and she didn't know it, but that's how he felt as well.

"You guys can't tell anyone. We don't know where they are, if they're tracking us, if they know where *we* are. We don't know when, or if we'll have to leave again." She gulped, swallowing her fear. "And it's a lot to absorb, I know that...but...you guys have a right to know."

Silence echoed loudly in the room. None of the boys daring to speak after such a revelation. None of them courageous enough to try and make sense of the horror she'd just revealed to them. None of them able to comprehend the mix of such terror with the sweet girls they'd grown to love over the past few months.

A long while passed before anyone said anything. The wind from the storm whipping at the windows, screaming as the night went on. It was Lucas who spoke up first.

"Thank you. For telling us. We'll keep your secret locked away, I promise." El gave him a tight-lipped smile, trying to keep the tears at bay. "We'll keep you as safe as possible. You and Max both. We *won't* let them find you." His voice was set, as if it was an easy decision that he'd just made, as if there was no room for argument. Dustin nodded beside him, still unable to put words together.

It was this determination that convinced her. That told her she had made the right choice in telling them. That they were worthy of her trust. That they would stay faithful to their word.

El yawned, the weight of the evening setting in and making her eyes heavy.

"Will you guys help me move Max to our room? I think she'd be more comfortable in there."

An hour had passed since they'd all said goodnight, eyes heavy not with sleep, but with the shock of the appalling truth. El sat up on the side of the bed, gazing down at her socked feet. She couldn't possibly sleep, not with the revelation of Lucas's powers and the trauma of Max's accident still so fresh on her mind.

Pushing herself off the edge and padding out quietly into the living room, El took a deep breath, swallowing her nerves.

There was only one more thing toying at her brain, and she was itching to address it.

As quietly as she could, El climbed up the ladder to the loft where Mike was staying. Coming up, she saw the dim glow of fairy lights illuminating the small window on the far wall. A large mattress covered in navy blue blankets was pushed down as far as it could go, taking up most of the area of the loft. And sitting in the middle of it all was Mike, cross-legged with his head in his hands.

He evidently didn't hear her coming, so as she stepped up, El coughed softly, catching his attention. Mike's dark eyes swung up to hers, his face crumbling as he let out a deep, relief-filled sigh. He sat up on his knees in the small space as she neared closer, stumbling over to him.

In an instant, they were together again.

She collapsed into him as Mike tucked her into his arms, pulling her down to the mattress with him. He wrapped her up as tight as he possibly could, El pressing her face into his chest, her dark hair splaying out around them.

For a while, they just lay there, holding each other under the blankets, the snowy wind howling against the small window above them. El decided it was her favorite place, right there in his arms. She felt invincible, like nothing from her past could catch her, like no one would find her. His strong arms and gentle touch made her feel protected and safe and respected and loved and loved and loved.

After a few peaceful yet heavy minutes, El pulled back, setting her

head on the pillow next to his. She brought her hands up in between them, reaching up and grasping onto his before intertwining their fingers.

“Mike,” she whispered, not fully prepared to say what she *needed* to say. “Now that you...now that you know everything, I understand if...if what you said *earlier* ...if that isn’t true anymore.” He frowned at her, his brow knitting together in confusion.

El shivered despite the warmth of the blankets. She didn’t want to say the words, but she wanted to make it as clear as possible that he had an out. Just as it dawned on him what she was referring to, El took a deep breath, tears forming in her eyes for what felt like the millionth time that night.

Before Mike could interject, El continued on. “I-I just want to tell you, because I didn’t earlier, that...that I...” She paused and took a shuddering breath, letting go of any inhibitions and fears and hesitancy. “Dammit, that I am so in *love* with you Mike Wheeler. God, I’m so stupidly in love with you it takes up every part of my head. I’m in love with your nerdy little rambles and your gross science textbook, I’m in love with your kind heart, and your freckles, and your laugh, and your smile, and your movie obsession, and your wit, and your humor, and just...everything.” El shut her eyes and took a deep breath. “And I-I didn’t say it before, but *goddamn* I’m saying it now. And I really do understand if, after everything, you don’t want to be attached to me because it’s a heavy burden to take in and-”

Mike shook his head in panic before he cut her off by moving forward and pressing his mouth against hers, effectively silencing her rambling. El flinched at first, but quickly sighed against him, slowly moving her lips against his. He let go of her hands and instead pulled them up to cup her chin. Molding his lips against hers, Mike groaned softly as she pushed in closer to him, tangling her fingers in his shirt.

They pulled away after a moment, breathless as they gazed at one another.

“You are *not* a burden. You are not someone different now,” Mike whispered in the small space between them, “You are not someone I am *ever* going to be able to forget. El, I love you so damn much. God,

I've loved you from day one."

El smiled, laughing a bit before leaning forward to kiss him again and again and again. Her hands tangled in his hair and she thought she may never need anything else in her life.

Eventually, they fell asleep, twisted up together under the blankets. Her head pressed against his chest, his arms wrapped around her waist.

There were still so many questions, so much left unsaid, but they could figure it out later, together.

Notes for the Chapter:

Alright! Welcome to the back half of this story, it's about to get really exciting :)

P.S. No joke, I was crying at all of your wonderful comments on the last chapter. Seriously, thank you so much, your comments make it all so worth it.

14. Human Hangover

The sky was blanketed by the thick grey clouds still hovering over the cabin when he woke up the next morning. The wild howling of the snowstorm had ceased, leaving behind several feet of freshly laden snow. It was cold. *Really* cold. Three pairs of socks cold. But he'd never felt warmer.

Mike sighed serenely, pulling the blankets tighter around the sleeping girl laying against his side. Her face was pressed to his chest, her arms loosely hanging around his waist and her eyelashes tickling his skin. As he tucked her in tighter, she breathed out peacefully, digging her fingers into his shirt and snuggling deeper into him. El had slept all through the night, not waking up once from nightmares.

Nightmares that Mike now knew the horrifying origin of.

He protectively pulled his arms tighter around her as his mind forced him to go over everything she'd told them the night before. His heart sped up as he remembered the distant look on her face, the pain in her voice. After all she'd told him, Mike had guessed that *maybe* she had just grown up in a bad foster home, just until she was old enough to move out. The truth, though, the truth was worse than anything he could have possibly imagined.

Beaten, abused, manipulated, *tortured* . For sixteen *years* . Mike's heart ached heavily as he imagined what she had gone through, how lonely she must have been, how much fear and pain she must have felt, how she must have dreamed of escape. His jaw clenched as he thought about his own upbringing, of the laughter, the love, the *family* . A life that El had been robbed of, replaced with a demented, horrific version with only fear and terror.

Picturing the horrors of her first sixteen years, Mike was suddenly very thankful to have her pressed up against him, where he knew she would be safe. He gazed down at El, admiration and love written all over his face. As her eyes relaxed with the peacefulness of sleep, she somehow looked younger, less burdened.

Slowly, Mike lifted a gentle hand and began brushing it through her

long, dark hair, smiling to himself as he heard her hum in appreciation. How could she be here with him? How could she still be *standing* after all that she'd been through.

Mike answered his own question easily. *Because she's El.*

Although her sudden confession left him wanting nothing more than to hold her and shield her and protect her from everything harmful in the world, it also made him fully aware of how *strong* she was.

Beaten, abused, manipulated, tortured, and yet she smiled with a gracefulness unlike anything he'd ever seen before. Mistreated for *years* and yet there was only kindness, only light. Pushed around and persecuted, yet she remained resilient and courageous, waking up each day with strength and compassion despite the trauma she'd endured.

As if she could read his thoughts, El blinked slowly in the dim glow of the morning light. He felt her mouth slowly curve into a smile against his chest as she registered his gentle hand running through her hair. They lay there for a moment more, the heat from their tangled bodies keeping each other warm despite the frigid atmosphere.

Gradually, El lifted her chin, resting it on his chest and beaming up into his eyes. She smiled gently, and Mike's infatuated heart filled with affection and admiration and love and love and love and love and love.

"Hey you," she grinned, positively glowing with bliss and contentment.

"Hey yourself," Mike gave her a half-smile before leaning forward to press a soft kiss against her smiling lips. He pulled away and vaguely wondered if it was even *possible* to tell her how much he loved her, how much he admired her, especially now that he knew her full story. As she rested her chin against him once more, a frown took over her face, and she slowly reached a hand up to poke the spot in between his eyes where his brow was furrowed.

"You alright? You look all...twisty," she questioned, sliding her hand

down to trace indistinguishable patterns against his cheek.

Mike let out a short, gruff laugh. Only El could live through the most traumatic childhood a person could have and *still* be so strong hearted as to ask if *he* was okay.

“Me? I’m okay, just...thinking,” he said, voice raspy from sleep. She frowned once more, this time in understanding, and again it was as if she knew exactly what he was thinking. In the back of his head, Mike wondered if this was another power she had, one that she’d kept to herself.

“I *think* too sometimes. About...about all of it.” El paused, sadness clouding her sleepy features. “Sometimes...I-I want to think about it, I want to remember it all. Most times I don’t though. That’s when it’s hardest. My brain won’t leave me alone a lot of the time.”

Her eyes filled with sorrow and Mike felt his heart shake.

Then, something he didn’t recognize dawned on her, and she quickly lifted her eyes to gaze into his.

“Mike...I’m so sorry I ran away last night. I panicked and...and I ran, and that wasn’t fair to you. At all.” Mike’s jaw dropped and he started firmly shaking his head.

“No, El, no, you don’t have to apologize. You have your own ways of dealing with everything, and I don’t want you to ever worry about *me* when you’re faced with those situations.” He paused, his jaw relaxing as her eyes unclouded a bit. “Why did you, though? Run away? Who was that woman?”

Anguish flashed across her face as her eyes shifted downwards. A long beat passed in which their combined breathing was the only thing sounding in the loft. Just as Mike was beginning to curse himself for asking such a *stupid* question, El whispered through the dim glow illuminating the room.

“It was Will’s mom.”

Mike’s breath caught in his throat.

“O-Oh.”

She smiled sadly, nodding slowly.

“Will...he was able to project images and thoughts into people’s heads. Kind of like mind-reading in reverse. I met him a year before Max, two years before we escaped. He used to show me images of these...these memories that he had before he was taken.” Mike gazed in understanding as her eyes started welling up, “Will would show me his...his Joyce Byers and Jim Hopper. His brother, Jonathan. His house, his room...anything he could think of to make life...easier.”

Her lip trembled as she bit back tears, “I’d never seen her in real life before, and it really...it really brought me back. But you had just been saying all these wonderful things and...”

Mike grimaced at this own stupidity, “Oh my god...El...”

“...And I was going to say it all back, tell you just how much I *love* you, but seeing her...I was just...all of a sudden...I felt so *selfish* . So...so self-centered and stupid and *wrong* to have so much when Will is just *dead* . When his mom is clearly still so...heartbroken. I panicked and I just...I ran, and I’m sorry.”

Mike sighed, his own heart breaking for the endlessly kind and sweet and loving girl laying on his chest. He leaned down again, softly pressing his lips to her own once, twice, as many times as he could manage. Pulling back, he began brushing her soft hair behind her ears as he stared into her eyes, needing her to know and understand his words.

“El, you do not, and will never, have to apologize for how you’re affected by...by everything. I can’t even *imagine* what it must be like to live in your shoes, but I want you to know that I’m on your side. When things get to be too much, if something sets you off, or sends you spiraling, I want to know so that I can help you come back. I love you so much, El, *so much* . I’m yours for *everything* .”

She laughed softly through a watery grin as she pulled herself up to kiss him again and again and again. Mike’s heart swelled every time her lips molded against his, as if they were puzzle pieces finally

fitting together.

El settled herself against him again, pressing her face into the hollow of his neck. Mike wrapped his arms around her, hugging her tightly to him. Their socked feet twisted up together at the end of the mattress, the heavy blankets keeping them cozy in the snow-covered cabin.

After a few moments, Mike felt El's breathy laugh humming against his neck.

"What?" He smiled.

"It's funny to think about someone *living* in shoes."

They were all in the kitchen when Max finally woke up.

Mike stood behind El, his arms wrapped loosely around her waist and his chin resting on her head. Dustin and Lucas faced off by the stove, arguing amusedly as they cooked, or rather burnt, sausages and pancakes.

"Lucas pleeeeeease! It hurts really bad!"

"No."

"But Lucasssss!"

"Dude, I'm not healing that tiny little spot *just* because the oil popped out at you!"

Dustin inhaled dramatically, his lip pouting, "PLEEEEEEEASE!"

"What's going on?" Max said, limping slowly into the kitchen. They all turned as she walked in, eyebrows raised. She stared at them all expectantly, but no one said anything. Finally, El spoke up.

"H-Hey Max, how're you feeling?"

Max ambled in further, stiff as a board and clearly in pain.

"I feel like a giant bruise," She paused, grimacing as she took a seat on the counter. " *Why* do I feel like a giant bruise?"

Lucas stepped forward, "You don't...remember?" He asked, concern cutting at the edge of his voice. Max shook her head, rubbing her arm where the bone had popped out not twelve hours before.

El broke out of Mike's grasp, moving forward, her socks sliding against the tile of the kitchen floor.

"Max, can I talk to you...in private?" El grimaced as the words came out as flustered as she felt. Max nodded confusedly, jumping off the counter and wincing as her feet hit the floor.

El exchanged apologetic glances with the boys, all of them smiling as if to wish her luck.

The two girls wandered over to their room, El shutting the door behind them.

"El? What's going on? What happened last night?" Max asked, arms crossed over her chest. El wrung her hands together, swaying from side to side on the balls of her feet in front of the door. It had seemed like the best idea to tell the boys about everything last night, but now, looking at Max's concerned face, El wasn't sure she'd be able to articulate why she'd done it.

"Max, last night...there was an...incident."

"Woah, woah, woah, slow down. You're telling me Lucas...has powers?! And he...saved my life?" Max stared wide-eyed as El finished hastily explaining the events of the past day.

"Technically, you saved his life first. You pushed him out of the way of the truck," El inserted, trying to ease the blows. Max ignored this point, running anxious hands through her long red hair.

"And-and then you told them *everything* ?!" El winced as the last bit came out more aggressive than the rest. She took a step forward, arms outstretched.

“Max, you don’t understand. You were dying, I was watching you...die. A-And we obviously couldn’t take you to a hospital, and then Lucas, he just *healed you* . As in your bones somehow snapped back into place, and your *heart* started beating again. And I was just so shocked that it sorta...popped out.”

Max sighed, rubbing an exhausted hand over her worn down eyes, “Okay but why did you tell them *everything* ? Couldn’t you have just, I don’t know, flubbed the truth a little bit?”

El’s eyes shot up, and she had never felt more determined. She stood up straighter, dropping her arms and facing Max head-on.

“Yeah. Yeah, I could have lied, and hidden, and run away. But I didn’t. Because I trust them, Max. I trust all of them. Especially after Lucas saved your life, *exposing* his own powers which he’d clearly tried to keep under wraps. I trust them to keep our secret, to understand, and maybe even *help* us.” El took a deep breath, wrapping her arms around her middle, her heart pounding against her chest.

Max stared at her, eyebrows raised. El had never raised her voice at Max before. She had always been so quiet and non-confrontational. Max didn’t say anything for a while, clearly thinking it all over in her head.

Finally, she sighed, eyes drooping as she released the tensions in her shoulders. El gasped out a cry of relief as Max limped over and pulled her into a tight hug.

El crumbled instantly, wrapping her arms around her dearest friend and squeezing back just as tightly, mumbling apologies into her ear.

“El, honey, El, I’m so sorry you had to go through that,” Max whispered into her hair. El let a silent sob ring out, glad Max couldn’t see her face. “I can’t imagine how hard it must’ve been. Seeing me...seeing me dying, and then making this tough decision.” She pulled back, her arms on El’s shoulders. El swiped at a few tears running down her cheeks. “I trust them too. And if you think they deserved to know, then they deserved to know.”

El gave Max a watery smile before pulling her back in for another hug.

“I’m really glad you didn’t die.” El muttered against her neck. Max let out a bark of laughter, squeezing her tighter.

“Me too.”

They pulled back, both sporting tear tracks on their cheeks and red noses. As they disconnected, Max winced, moving to sit down on the edge of the bed.

“Well, I guess now I know why I feel like a human hangover.”

El smiled, “Yeah, Lucas said your body had just been through a lot, so it was going to hurt for a little while.” She paused. “You should let him check you out one more time, make sure everything’s alright.”

Max flushed bright red, her gaze dropping to her hands as she pushed a piece of crimson hair behind her ears. She nodded, clearly embarrassed about something that El didn’t pick up on. A beat passed, and El frowned to herself, trying to figure out what she’d said that was wrong. Before she could figure it out, Max looked up.

“Hey, what’s going on with you and Mike? Hmm? You both disappeared last night in the town, and don’t *even* get me started on how you were standing in the kitchen.”

It was El’s turn to blush, her ears turning pink as she grinned.

“Mike and I...” Even the sound of it made her smile. “Mike and I are...good. Really good.” El twisted her fingers together as she remembered how it felt to wake up with him that morning. “We’re together, I think.”

Max’s lips twitched up, her eyes bright and hopeful.

“You think?”

El looked back down at her hands, feeling extremely bashful.

“He told me he loved me. And I told him I loved him, too.” She said

quietly, not quite used to hearing the words out loud.

Before Max could say anything, El gasped as she remembered what had happened when he'd told her he loved her.

"Max! Last night, Max, he...he, Mike, he told me he loved me in front of that general store in town!" The redhead just stared, confusion written across her tired features.

"...Okay?"

"Right after he did it, Max, *right* after, guess who walked out of the store."

Max opened her mouth, no doubt a sarcastic and smart-ass retort on the tip of her tongue. El spoke up again before she could deliver it.

"Will's *mom* ."

Whatever it was that Max expected her to say, it hadn't been that. She blanched, turning a pale white as her eyebrows shot up.

"*What?*"

El nodded. "His Joyce Byers. She looked just like the visions he used to show us, except-" El stopped, sadness filling her once more as she remembered how Joyce's eyes seemed so sunken in, how her pale skin contrasted with the dark, purple bags resting under her eyes.

"Except what?"

El gazed back up, frowning, "Except, she looked so...sad and so...tired." Max sighed, reaching out to hold onto El's small fingers. She looked up, desperation etching into her light skin. "Max, we...we have to go talk to her. We have to tell her what happened to Will. She still doesn't know!"

Max's eyes widened, panic flashing across her face.

"Woah, hold your horses there!" El frowned, she didn't have any horses. "We can't go talk to her. We can't go anywhere *near* her. You remember what Will's file said. His whole family is under

surveillance.”

“But that was before he-”

“We can’t risk it.”

El could tell from Max’s tone that this was not up for debate, and considering all that had happened in the past day, she decided to let it go. For now.

Huffing, she nodded. Max squeezed her hand apologetically.

A beat passed in which the two girls absorbed everything, the snow outside piling up as more flakes fell from the dark clouds above.

“I miss him.” El whispered into the silence, her heart aching.

Max laid her head against El’s shoulder, her voice trembling.

“Me too.”

He tapped his fingers impatiently against the metal table. The frigid temperature of the room sending a shiver down his spine despite the heavy suit and coat he wore. It wasn’t preferential, but it got the best results. Not today though, as the subject in front of him proved.

The light illuminating the small room buzzed as they sat across from one another. He sighed in annoyance at the boy, who had failed him once more.

“Again.”

The guards pushed forward, pulling the boy’s arms back and slamming the metal rod forcefully against his stomach. The boy let out a pain-filled shriek before collapsing on the table, seemingly unconscious.

He huffed in annoyance, this would only take more time. Time they didn’t have.

“Do you want us to take him back, sir?” The moronic guard asked.

Dr. Martin Brenner sighed in irritation. “No, leave him. As soon as he wakes we’ll try again.”

Just as he was planning out the next steps of this operation, the door slammed open behind him, his asinine assistant striding in quickly.

“What is the meaning of all thi-”

“Sir, you need to see this.” His assistant shoved a computer onto the table in front of him, opening it quickly and pulling up the first page.

“What am I looking at?”

“Sir, a few days ago, our telephone operators picked up a 911 phone call in which a truck driver claimed to have hit someone before driving away. Now, this wasn’t of any disturbance until an official report was filed against the caller, claiming he had misled emergency services.”

Brenner raised an eyebrow, unimpressed.

“Several emergency personnel were sent out to the spot in which the caller claimed to have hit someone, but when they arrived, there was *no* sign that anyone had been there.”

Brenner huffed once more. “Why are you telling me this? What importance does this conversation hold in accordance to this operation?”

His assistant pushed the computer closer, pressing play on what appeared to be security camera footage.

“A nearby store picked this up on it’s surveillance cameras. Take a look.”

Brenner raised an eyebrow as the video progressed. He watched as initially, a pair ran across the road, before a group of three followed behind. The footage was shoddy, as there appeared to have been some sort of snowstorm on the night of the event. He watched as the girl in the group of three was struck hard by the truck, and even he

could see that she was no doubt killed in the crash.

He sat forward, however, and watched with wide eyes as one of the boys in the group pressed his hands against the girls chest. In an instant, she had shot up, her bones seemingly setting back into place. The boy and the other girl helped her up, but she dropped again, the group setting off further up the street, off-camera. The video ended, and Brenner lifted a hand to close the computer.

"Healing abilities? Excellent. Find the boy and send a team out to get h-

"That's not all." His assistant leaned forward, typing away hastily. "We ran facial recognition on all of the individuals involved in the crash. The other two boys were impossible to process, as they faced away from the cameras during the incident. The two girls, however..."

His assistant clicked once more, and Brenner sat up straight in his seat as the unmistakable images of Subjects Eleven and Thirteen were pulled up alongside the video.

"Well. I'll be damned. Subject Eleven. Subject Thirteen." He paused, glaring at the images. "I see they're operating under false identities. No doubt that was Thirteen's work. There is no way Subject Eleven could have made it on her own."

Hatred filled his entire being as he stared at their images, obviously modified with time. The only two to ever escape. The only two to defy him, to throw a wrench in his plans. Not for long.

Brenner stood and marched out the door, hoisting the computer and throwing it at his assistant.

"Find where this footage was taken from. Hunt them down. I want them back." He growled.

The heavy door slammed behind him as he left, silence echoing through the room once more.

Letting out the hardest breath he'd ever held in before, Will Byers slowly lifted his head off the table, his eyes wide and mouth hanging

open in shock.

His friends were alive. And they needed his help.

Notes for the Chapter:

You didn't think I would really kill off my SON did you?

15. The Warning

“So, when are you guys gonna team up with Lucas to form some awesome X-Men-Avengers-Justice League type group? You know, fight crime, save the world and all that?” Dustin asked, breaking the silence that had fallen over the group as they drove along the empty road.

Max groaned from her spot up front, rolling her eyes so hard that everyone in the car could physically feel it. Lucas scoffed and reached back to slap Dustin’s leg, keeping his eyes trained on the road in front of him. He was just about to lay in when El started nodding very seriously.

“Soon, definitely soon. I’m already getting the costumes ready. What do you think, latex or leather?” El raised her eyebrows in faux-excitement, “Ooh! Maybe we could go for coordinating colors, y’know, really emphasize the unbreakable bond holding our super-group together!” She grinned with a raised brow.

Max and Lucas let out barks of laughter from the front, and Dustin crossed his arms and began mumbling next to her about how it wouldn’t be such a bad idea. El’s heart leapt as she felt Mike laugh from his spot next to her, squeezing the hand that was intertwined with his own.

Beaming at him from her spot in the middle, El couldn’t help but marvel at the serenity she felt.

The rest of the trip had gone by without a hitch, despite it’s rough start. As it turned out, opening up and letting all of the metaphorical skeletons out of the closet had only brought the five of them closer. There *was* some sort of unbreakable bond now between not only Lucas, Max, and El herself, but also with Dustin and Mike. They had all taken the step and trusted each other with private, dangerous information, and it made them closer, more familial than anything El had ever known before.

She grinned and lay her head against Mike’s shoulder as she thought of all the fun they’d had the past few days.

Throughout the weekend, the snow had continued to pound down on the small cabin, only allowing them a few hours a day outside. They'd spent that scarce time making snow forts and hideouts, which were subsequently used for *intense* snowball fights.

El's cheeks had hurt from smiling so hard as she deflected snowball after snowball that had come hurtling her way. Dustin thought it was great fun and *absolutely* in accordance to the rules, but El figured that was probably only because he was on her team.

It was only when Max had realized she was using her powers that the game had intensified.

"Cheater!!" She had yelled, her nose red from the chill in the air. She'd turned to Mike and Lucas, her teammates, muttering something frantically before pulling them down and ducking behind their fort.

El had looked to Dustin in confusion, but he had been too busy hastily scooping up snow and adding more snowballs to their pile to take any notice.

Before she knew it, Mike was trudging through the snow towards their fort, his hands raised innocently in the air. El had frowned, tilting her head as he ambled over to their side, a sly grin painting his rosy cheeks. His hair had been adorably poking out from underneath his beanie and she'd immediately felt her focus waver.

"What are you-"

Her words had been cut off abruptly as Mike charged forward, wrapping his arms around her waist and lifting her up from behind.

"Now!!" Mike had shouted, and El gaped in horror as Max and Lucas suddenly jumped up, pelting them all with snowballs. She'd screamed in surprised delight, her cheeks hurting from laughing and smiling and laughing and smiling and laughing and *smiling* .

Mike's arms around her and the hum of his laugh had distracted El just enough that she couldn't focus enough to stop the seemingly never-ending attack.

Once Dustin had realized what was happening, he'd quickly mounted

a counter-attack. Screaming wildly, he began shoving snow down the back of Mike's jacket. With a shriek, Mike had dropped El back onto her feet, and she quickly spun around, scoffing and slapping at his chest weakly.

"Jerk! Look who's cheating now!" She should've been annoyed, but her smile was unwilling to drop, so she had just stood there beaming up at him, wondering if he could feel her happiness radiating out. Mike had only grinned back and she just loved him loved him loved him loved him loved him loved him.

"Sorry El, all's fair in love and war. This just happens to be both!"

El smiled against Mike's shoulder as she reminisced, positive she would never forget the joy she had felt that weekend. How the snow-covered trees were magical and delicate and *beautiful*, or how the warmth of the fire heated her hands after coming inside, or especially how the shadows of the snowfall had danced across Mike's cheeks as he slept, his body pressed solidly against her own.

It was like he was everywhere all the time for her. Mike took up El's entire brain, which wasn't exactly a new feeling, the difference only being that now she could *do* something about it.

Now, she could hug him and hold him whenever she wanted. She could kiss him and cuddle him and lay her head against him and hold his hand whenever she wanted. It was wonderful in the most spectacular way, and it lit up her cheeks and made her thoughts race and her heart beat wildly. El was *completely* lovesick, a word Max had introduced after she'd asked if it was okay to stay with Mike for the night, and for the next night, and for the night after that. For all of the nights, really.

Lucas's voice from the front broke her out of her warm thoughts.

"Hey is it alright if I drop you guys off at the apartment? I gotta run down to the shop real quick, and if I'm already driving, I'd rather not walk."

Affirming grunts sounded from around the car, and El perked up as she remembered the movie night they had planned. With all the

excitement--and panic--of the trip, she'd completely forgotten about the *Star Wars* marathon they had planned for this evening.

Another hour, three packs of Skittles, a second round of *Wicked* , and an over-the-top performance by Dustin later, the car pulled up to the front of the boys' apartment building. Everyone except for Lucas quickly jumped out and began heaving bags onto the sidewalk, ignoring the annoyed looks from passers-by.

Waving goodbye as Lucas pulled out back onto the street, the four of them started to haul their suitcases and supplies inside, collectively making their way up the stairs to the fourth floor. Once inside the apartment, they all quickly dropped their bags and collapsed onto the couches and chairs, exhausted.

Dustin raised a pointed hand from where he was sprawled on the carpet, "El?" he asked, his eyes shut.

She cracked one of her own eyes open from her spot on the couch, her hands resting haphazardly against her grumbling stomach.

"Yeah?"

"I so wish your *thing* wasn't a secret. Because it totally would've helped."

A beat passed in which they all imagined how easy it would've been to let El's powers do all the work.

"Same," El and Max sighed at the same time.

The four of them laughed, arms aching and breaths heaving. After a few quiet minutes, El felt Mike groan next to her, the sound reverberating around the room.

"Hungry?" Dustin asked, seemingly reading his mind.

"Starved," Mike responded, his own stomach rumbling as he said it.

Dustin slowly rose from his spot off the floor, rubbing a tired hand across his face before turning and making his way to the kitchen. Max, El, and Mike all followed suit, pushing off the pillows with

groans and grumbles.

“Hey, do you guys have any pomegranates? I’m *really* craving some pomegranate seeds right now,” Max asked, taking her shoes off and sliding along the tile to stand by Dustin, hovering behind him as he peered into the fridge.

He turned, his brow furrowed seriously, “Pomegranates? You mean the devil’s favorite fruit?”

El giggled as she slid up onto the barstools, crossing her arms and laying her chin down against them. Mike pulled himself up to the chair next to hers, his socked feet swinging.

Max just stared back in mock-hurt, her nose wrinkling.

“Dude, pomegranate seeds are *fucking* delicious and anybody who says anything otherwise is WRONG,” she stated, eyes wide and eyebrows raised, daring him to challenge her. Dustin seemed to get the message, but the glint in his eyes told El that he was about to fire back.

She decided to jump in with a funny story about Max and pomegranates before it got ferocious.

Sitting up and leaning on her elbows, El spoke up, “Max, do you remember that time a few years ago when we were in the-”

And all of a sudden, she wasn’t sitting in the apartment anymore.

She wasn’t quite in the world.

She wasn’t quite anywhere at all.

There was no sound, no light, nothing.

Only darkness.

El stood static in place, ice cold fear flooding her body as her adrenaline kicked in, forcing her mind into a panicked survival mode. Her breathing picked up rapidly and her heart started hammering ceaselessly against her chest. El lifted her hands forward in defense,

realization striking her.

She knew this place. She had visited this place more times than she could count.

With shaky motions, El took a few steps forward in the Void, her frightful gaze whipping around trying to find something, anything to tell her what was going on.

The only logical reason she could think up between trembling breaths was that this was a nightmare that she was trapped in, unusually real and clear, but a nightmare nonetheless.

El wrapped her arms around her waist, gasping and squeezing hard as she tried to force herself awake, to compel her mind to let her out.

Before she could calm down enough to give it a real try, a quiet, disconnected voice echoed through the Void.

“They know where you are. Take the other boy and leave. Run, now. They’re coming for you all.”

With white hot pain, El’s head split as images suddenly pushed their way into her mind, invading her thoughts. She pressed her hands against her temples, trying to stop it all, to ease the pressure building in her skull.

A cold, metal room. A pair of handcuffs attached to a table.

A taser, it’s electric energy sparking dangerously towards her.

A van, blue with a flower-encircled logo.

Dr. Martin Brenner, leering down at her, hatred written across his menacing features.

The voice returned, and this time, El knew for sure.

“Run, before they get you again.”

And she was back.

El's eyes shot open, her breathing just as heavy as it had been in the Void. She stumbled off the barstool, collapsing in a heap on the floor. Her vision swam and stars danced in her watery eyes. Vaguely, she felt her arm ache where she'd landed on it.

Gaze darting up, she saw that Mike was with her. He was holding her up and talking to her, concern written all over his kind face.

She couldn't hear a word he was saying.

She couldn't hear anything.

Anything except *his* voice.

Will's voice.

Wasting no time, El rasped and sobbed slightly as she scrambled to her feet, scared eyes desperately looking for Max's. Mike was holding her up, she knew it, but she couldn't feel it, couldn't feel anything but hysteria.

Whipping around, her cloudy vision landed on Max, who sat crumpled against the kitchen counter. Dustin was holding her by her arms, shaking her roughly. But Max's wide eyes were detached and far away, staring grief-stricken and alarmed at the floor.

Slowly, she shifted her shocked gaze up to meet El's, and they knew they'd seen the same things.

Both of them took in sharp, terrified gasps, breathing for what seemed like the first time.

"D-Did you-" El croaked. "W-Was that..."

"...Will..." Max whispered in a horrified voice, her body shaking tremendously as she lifted her quivering hands to cover her mouth.

El's trembling vision swam once more, and she felt the blood rushing quickly to her feet. Claspng onto Mike's arms, still wrapped tightly around her waist, she collapsed.

Lucas drove steadily down the dimly lit street, eyes peering forward as he looked for a good parking spot. He'd left his backpack at the shop earlier that week, and he really needed it back. It was annoying that he had to come all the way downtown at all, when he *really* only wanted to be home with his friends.

And Max.

Especially Max.

Finding a tricky parking spot by the coffee shop, Lucas quickly parked the car and hopped out, heading down the street. As he strolled, his mind shifted to the trip and all that it had revealed.

His heart still started racing as he thought about El making the pitcher of water *float* right past him. About how she was able to deflect *all* of their precisely aimed snowballs with just a jerk of her head. About how Max had fixed the refrigerator when it had broken with just a zap of electric blue energy. About how he wasn't the only one with powers he couldn't explain.

Lucas sighed as he weaved through the crowds. Thinking sadly about everything *else* he'd learned. Everything about where El and Max had come from, and why they were so secretive.

With a shudder and a flare of anger, Lucas thought of the pained look El had worn as she described both the people who'd taken her and what would happen if she didn't do what they commanded of her.

When he'd healed Max the second time, once they had gotten her back to the cabin and onto the couch, it had quickly become apparent to him that some of her injuries were not from the crash at all. No, some of them had been there for *years* .

Incorrectly set bones, torn muscles, scars of varying degrees *littered* all over her small body. He'd done the best he could, but like he'd told El, injuries that were long-term were trickier, more difficult to heal right away.

Lucas pulled his jacket tighter around his front, suddenly feeling icy cold.

He was lucky. He'd never been tortured, manipulated, beaten.

He'd kept his powers a secret, just like his mother had instructed him to do as far back as he could remember.

It kept him safe, away from harm.

It didn't keep El away from harm.

Or Max.

Breaking out of his alarming thoughts, Lucas pushed open the door to A Coffee Shop, hurrying to the back room in order to grab the backpack he'd forgotten during his last shift. He didn't want to stay long, he wanted to get back to his friends so that they could start their *Star Wars* marathon.

Plus he'd parked like shit and didn't want to get a ticket.

Waving to some of the more familiar customers, Lucas slung the backpack around his shoulder as he darted out, mind still focused on the horrific revelations of the weekend.

The sky had turned dark, and the streets were lit with only the old lamplights hanging every hundred feet or so.

Lucas strolled down the path, back up to where his car was parked. As he walked, his mind drifted back again.

As frightening as the truth had been, it also made Lucas realize just how *strong* Max and El were. They were braver than he'd ever been or ever would be, it was just a fact. There was no way in which he could have survived what they had gone through. No, absolutely no way.

Moving from state to state, changing their names and complete identities, living quite literally on the run from an evil entity, it was more than he could handle and he knew it.

Lucas remained deep in thought as he neared his car, marveling at the strength of his friends and the horrors of a life that could have been his.

Unfortunately, Lucas was so deep in thought that he didn't realize he was being followed.

Just as he glanced down to reach for his keys, four men in black padded suits charged him.

With a grunt, Lucas was shoved into a nearby alley way, his breath knocked right out of him as he fell to the ground. Eyes widening with shock and confusion, Lucas felt several pairs of hands yanking him up and pressing him forcefully against the wall.

"What the fuck!! Get the fuck off me!!" He shrieked, fighting against their tight grip. All of them wore masks, covering their faces and only exposing their cold, unforgiving eyes.

His breath came out in quick, sharp wheezes as they pushed him back, slapping a hand across his mouth to quiet his calls for help.

Lucas opened his mouth to bite at the man's hand, but before he got a chance, he felt a fist hit ruthlessly against his cheekbone. Pain swirled in his vision as his mind jumbled.

As quickly as it had come, however, it disappeared, his body healing him immediately.

"Do it." One of them uttered dangerously, roughly pulling the sleeves of Lucas's jacket up. He pushed and scratched and fought against the men holding him, panic shooting through him as he saw the smallest of the crew pull a needle out from his pocket.

"W-Wait! What is th-"

The needle was pierced unceremoniously into his arm, instantly slowing his actions. Lucas felt his mind lull, his fighting becoming less forceful as the blue liquid inside the needle was injected into his system. His arms dropped, his legs shaking as they threatened to give way.

"That's it, punk. Take it in." The man crooned, his grip tightening as Lucas felt himself go limp.

As soon as he collapsed, Lucas felt his body being lifted up, supported

by three of the masked men. His heart raced with fright and panic as the dragged him further down the alley where a blue van with a flower-covered logo sat open and waiting.

“This one was a fighter. He’ll be fun for Brenner. Hey, how much we gettin’ for this one?” One of them asked as they dragged Lucas’s limp body, his consciousness wavering.

Lucas’s mind was reeling, his breathing quick and hasty. He wasn’t getting enough air, he couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t br-

And all of a sudden, Lucas could feel his arms again. The feeling was returning in his legs as well. His mind was becoming clearer, he could *think* again.

With a rush of gratitude and thankfulness, Lucas realized his powers were fighting against the serum as well. Just like it had done with the earlier punch, Lucas’s body was healing him, forcing the needle’s injection away from his nervous system.

The masked men didn’t seem to realize this as they roughly dragged him across the alley, muttering to themselves about overtime and extra pay.

Lucas forced himself to stay limp, to remain calm and clear headed. He had a gut-feeling who these people were, and he didn’t want to find out if he was right.

Breathing deeply, Lucas slowly glanced up, trying to find his moment to fight back.

The man to the side of him had what looked to be a stun gun, or maybe a taser attached to his hip. Lucas took a deep breath in, trying to remain as calm and level-headed as he could be after being attacked by four strangers in masks.

Biding his time, Lucas focused all of his energy into staying slack and unmoving, waiting for the right moment to arrive.

As they neared the van, Lucas watched through half-closed eyes as two of the men leapt forward and piled into the van. The man to the

left of him was also loosening his grip, moving forward to climb in as well. That left him in the arms of only one masked-man.

As fast as he possibly could, Lucas took a deep breath and whipped out of the man's grasp, ripping the taser off his belt and pressing his finger on the button.

The attackers were evidently caught off-guard, obviously not used to their captives fighting back. They spun around in shock as Lucas grunted and rushed towards them, the electric blue sparks of the taser shooting dangerously out at them.

He jabbed the taser into the neck of the nearest man, making him fall to the ground, shuddering in a collapsed mess. The rest of them followed instantly, moving quickly as they realized what was happening.

Lucas moved without hesitation, attacking each of them as they came his way. His mind buzzed with an energy he didn't know he held as he fought them off, one by one. It was fight or flight and *god dammit* he was fighting.

Knocking each masked man to the ground with a touch of the taser, Lucas felt a shocked grin spread on his face, feeling horrifically yet completely justified in his counter-attack.

As he shoved the electric blue light roughly against the cheek of the last man, the one who'd hit him, Lucas felt him drop unconscious to the floor of the alley way, just like the rest of them.

Standing shocked and shaking, Lucas realized he wasn't breathing, his lungs aching all of a sudden. Inhaling sharply, he felt his eyes dart around first down the alley and then to the van, trying to figure out what to do next.

His feet moved of their own accord.

Sprinting to the driver's side of the van, Lucas quickly scrambled inside and found the keys already in place. With a gasp of both relief and overall horror, he turned on the ignition, slamming his foot on the gas and taking off down the street, away from where his attackers

lay half-dead in the alley.

He needed to get away. He needed to run.

Terror filling his veins, he realized what his attack might have meant.

He needed to tell his friends, before it was too late.

Notes for the Chapter:

I think it's safe to say the shit has hit the fan.

16. On The Run: Part Two

As he paced the span of their small living room, running his shaking hands through his wild hair, Mike thought only of the horror in her unfocused eyes.

He tried to keep his mind occupied as El lay passed out on the couch, Max awake but unmoving next to her, staring blankly at the wall.

Everything had been fine.

More than fine, they were having fun, goofing around, just being... *normal* .

Mike was even working up the courage to ask El out on a real, proper date when all of a sudden, she'd sat bolt upright in her chair, eyes slammed shut. A concerned gasp from Dustin across the kitchen had told him that Max was in the same position.

They had just stared in shock for a moment, not sure if it had been a joke or something. But after a full minute had passed, Mike and Dustin had quickly started shaking the two girls, trying to gently wake them up from whatever trance they were under.

Biting his nail, Mike remembered the hard thump of his heart against his chest as his panicked mind tried to figure out what in the sweet *fuck* was going on. He'd been shaking El, begging her to snap out of it. He'd just started to give up, tears burning the corners of his eyes, when she woke up with a sharp inhale.

Her eyes had flown open, mouth gaping as she fell hard off the barstool and onto the floor in a heap. Mike had jumped off his own chair as she came to, rushing to her and gathering her up in his arms as she sputtered incomprehensibly.

"El! El, are you okay?! El, what the hell just happened?" He'd frantically asked her, but she only stared up at him from her spot on the ground, her normally sweet, kind eyes now filled to the brim with only shock and terror.

She'd scrambled up in a flurry, her arms laying limp against where his own were wrapped around her waist. Mike had helped her up, supporting her small, trembling frame. El slowly guided him to where Max sat crumpled against the kitchen counter, her gaze as unfocused as it was now.

"D-Did you-" El had whispered, her voice shaking, "W-Was that..."

"Will..." Max had answered, mouth hanging open in fright.

And then El had gone completely limp under his grasp, dropping like dead weight in his arms.

Mike hadn't hesitated, no matter how confused he was. The second she'd started to pass out, he'd scooped an arm under her legs, the other wrapped around her shoulders. Moving quickly, Mike laid her down gently on the couch, Dustin and Max followed close behind, the latter of which not saying another word, instead gazing blankly at the floor.

No one had moved since then.

An eerie silence took over the room, only broken by Dustin's soft questioning towards Max, who remained unresponsive. Mike stopped his pacing and moved back to El's side, kneeling by the couch and running a soft hand over her cheeks. With a soft touch, he trepidly pushed a strand of dark hair behind her ear. Sighing, Mike wrapped his long fingers around her limp hand, squeezing gently.

Max had said Will. He was sure that's what he heard. Will. As in the friend they'd lost after escaping that....that place. The friend who had supposedly been dead for five years. Mike was lost in his thoughts, lost in his wondering and confusion when she started to wake up.

El blinked dazedly into the light of the living room, and for a few brief, blissful moments, she couldn't remember what had happened.

Then she felt the weight of a hand in her own, she saw Max's static form at her feet, and the memories came flooding back.

El sat up with a jerk, eyes wide.

“El!” Mike exclaimed, jumping back.

She couldn’t breathe again. Heaving, she slung her legs off the couch, leaning over and clasp at her chest as she tried to catch her breath. Mike acted fast, rushing forward and gently pushing her head between her knees just like his sister used to do with him when his parents were fighting.

He rubbed her back softly, quietly whispering in her ear, trying to get through to her that he was there, that he wouldn’t leave, that it would all be okay.

El wanted to smile, she wanted to hug him and hold him and never let go, but the guilt pressing on her heart stopped any and all actions.

After a few long minutes of heavy breathing and swirling in her mind, El sat up slowly, gazing into Mike’s concerned dark eyes with trepidation.

“Mike,” her voice was raspy, “Mike, you need to find Lucas. We need to go.”

Mike stared back, his eyes widening in alarm. “What? Go? Go where?” He asked, his stomach dropping.

Instead of answering, El gave in and lunged forward, wrapping her arms around his neck and pulling him in as tight as she could. Mike’s own arms wound around her back, and he held her with the newfound panic that once he let go she might be gone forever.

And she loved him loved him loved him, but time was of the essence.

“I’ll explain it all, I promise. Just please, take Dustin and find Lucas a-and get him back here as fast as you can,” she whispered, wrapping her fingers into the hair at the base of his neck.

Mike allowed himself one more moment, one more beat of her heart against his own before he released his arms from around her. Gazing back at her, Mike leaned forward, pressing a soft but telling kiss on her lips.

Turning to Dustin, he took a deep breath. The two of them wordlessly

got up and moved to Mike's room, leaving the girls alone in the living room.

The air was thick and heavy, so much so that El's muscles ached uncomfortably as she moved her gaze over to Max's still form.

"Max..."

That was all it took.

Max turned her head shakily, staring back at El with tears shimmering in her eyes. In a voice El barely recognized, one she'd only heard years before in the car after they escaped, Max spoke up.

"I left him behind."

She crumbled in a second, collapsing in on herself in a way El had never seen her do before. Sobs wracked her body as El moved forward, throwing her arms around her friend and holding her up. Tears trickled down her own cheeks, but she couldn't recall when she'd started crying.

"I-I took us up the elevator. I didn't...I didn't wait or...or go back for him. He's alive, El. Will is *alive* and he has been all this time and...and *I left him behind* ." Max choked, her chest heaving. El pulled back gently. Max's cheeks were red and splotchy, streaks running down her pale face from tears. Lifting a hand to wipe away the tears, El gathered the words she didn't know she had.

"We don't know what happened that night, Max. Will was...he was *shot* . Three times. W-We watched him...drop." El marvelled at how strong her voice sounded, despite the fear and guilt and anger coursing through her. "You did what I would have done, you did what Will would have done." Max crumbled again, and El was glad the redhead couldn't see her face, because she was a second away from collapsing as well.

They sat embracing for a beat, each one letting this revelation settle in, make a home in their minds. In the back of her head, El wondered how it had been possible for Will to contact them through the Void, as she herself had always been vital in doing so when they were sent

on missions together. But this thought came and went as she recalled the images he'd sent them, the warning he'd cautioned.

There would be time to deal with it, time to process the fact that Will was *alive*. But the message in the visions were burned in the front of El's mind, and she knew there wasn't any time to waste.

El pulled back again and began speaking quickly, "Max, they know about Lucas. I don't know how, but they know about him, *and* about how we know each other."

Max nodded and took a deep breath, gathering herself. In an instant her steely demeanor had returned, the redness under her eyes serving as the only evidence she'd been crying.

"Right. Okay, we need to find Lucas and...and we need to go. We'll...figure out the rest once we get there."

"Benny's?" El asked.

The confirming nod was all she needed.

Just as they stood up, feeling determined despite the churning in their stomachs, Mike and Dustin were barrelling into the room, eyes wide and wild.

"We think something's wrong with Lucas!" Mike exclaimed as they moved forward, breathing hard.

"Woah woah woah, what's wrong?" Max asked, concern lining her voice. El felt her heart speed up. *There was no way they could have gotten to him that quickly, was there?*

"H-He's not answering his phone a-and we called the shop and they said he already came and left." Dustin stammered, waving his phone around frantically. "It's not like him to skip calls, he always answers his phone, *always* I swear and now he's not and...and I don't know!"

Max and El shared a horrified, knowing look.

Not good, not good, not good.

“Try again, w-we have to find him.” El gasped, wringing her hands together in panic. If they lost Lucas on the same day they found out Will was alive all this time, she might just snap in half.

Glancing over to where Max was standing stock-still, El was selfishly thankful it wasn’t Mike in this position. She didn’t know a lot about whatever was going on between Max and Lucas, but if *Mike* was in trouble, if he was taken...she wouldn’t survive it.

At the thought, El moved over to where Mike stood, needing him close. He opened his arms and took her in immediately. She pushed her head into his side as she weaved one arm around his waist and the other around his back, twisting her fingers into the material of his t-shirt. Her alarming and intrusive thoughts were quelled slightly as he held her close, but the severity of the situation didn’t escape her.

Just as Dustin glanced down to dial Lucas’s number again, the phone lit up, a corny picture of the two of them covering the screen.

Dustin slammed on the answer button, immediately putting it on speaker.

“Lucas! Lucas where are yo-”

“They found me!! They found me but...but I-I got away!! El, Max you guys gotta run! You’ve gotta get the fuck out of there!”

Max moved forward, taking the phone out of Dustin’s hand.

“Lucas, we know, w-we know and we have a plan, but you have to come with us!” She was frantic in a way El had never seen her before. “Where are you? We have to go together!”

The sound of car horns and an engine running sounded off as Lucas paused, the moment glaring on for too long. “I-I’ll meet you in the back of the apartment building. In...in five minutes!”

“Wait!” Max shouted into the phone. “Wait, as soon as you hang up, throw your phone out the window!”

Lucas didn’t answer this request, and instead he just hung up.

No one moved for a second, silence echoing through the room. Then Max turned and faced them all, her jaw clenched and eyes set.

“Take one bag from the trip, the one that’s got just the essentials. Y’know some clothes and socks and all that shit. Leave your phones and computers here, they might be tracking us through them. No food, there’ll plenty once we get there. Move people!”

The apartment was a flurry of motion as the four of them hustled to get everything they needed. El knew where they were going, and what this might entail, but the boys didn’t. Mike and Dustin were clearly flustered as they tore through their already packed suitcases, trying to figure out what they needed without asking stupid questions.

Out of the corner of her eye, El saw Dustin shoving his snow gloves into Mike’s face, as if to ask if they would be necessary. Mike just shrugged, and Dustin threw them unceremoniously to the floor.

Two minutes passed before Max shouted out again.

“Okay people! We will be using emergency escape number one! Down the south fire escape and towards the service exit!” At her words, she and El both started walking towards the window, dragging their now lighter bags behind them.

Dustin and Mike blanched, glancing trepidly out the window where the rickety old platforms and ladders sat. They didn’t question it though, instead scrambling after the two girls.

El pulled the window up, the cool air rushing over her. Without thinking too hard, she swung a leg over and crawled out onto the metal platform, not daring to look down.

Act brave, be brave. Act brave, be brave. Act brave, be brave .

Closing her eyes, El pulled up her powers and ran a hand along the fire escape, feeling for all the creaks and broken spots and possible danger. Opening her eyes once more, she turned back to the group huddled around the window.

“Okay. Follow me, slowly.”

Without looking behind to see if they were following, El moved to the ladder, swinging her bag over her shoulders and beginning to climb down gradually. As she went, she eased the spots in which the structure was fractured or broken, mending it just enough that it would support the weight of four grown adults.

Making her way down all four floors, El's mind started lagging, and she faintly felt a drop of blood pooling on her lip. She was really stretching herself thin, holding all the broken spots together while also focusing on not falling off herself. Her mind was getting tired but she couldn't stop moving and working and moving and working and moving and working.

She'd never been more relieved as she stepped a hesitant foot on the ground, immediately leaning against the wall next to her as she tiredly opened her eyes and breathed in deeply. One by one she heard her friends coming down as well, each landing with an, "Oomph!" onto the ground next to her.

Mike moved towards her as soon as he was off the ladder, wrapping an arm around her back and holding her up gently, his eyes darting to the blood under her nose.

"Shit, El." He'd whispered, using the sleeve of his jacket to wipe the blood away.

Max landed and El let go, the fire escape creaking dangerously as it returned to its formally unstable state.

Before anyone could do anything more, the squeal of a car sounded from around the corner. A second later, a blue van with a flower-encircled logo turned the corner, heading towards them. Reaching up and squeezing Mike's hand, El let out a horrified gasp, recognizing it instantly as the same van that Will had sent in his warning.

"Shit!" Max seemed to realize it too. "Back up into the shade, guys. And keep your heads down!"

No one argued, moving quickly into the shaded area. The van drove closer, and El slammed her eyes shut, pushing her head against Mike's arm as she tried to find the energy she knew she would need

in order to fight back.

Act brave, be brave. Act brave, be brave. Act brave, be brave .

The van came to a squealing stop and El tried to quell her thumping heart. It was beating so loud in her ears there was no way they wouldn't hear it.

Just as she was gathering the courage to pull away from Mike's safety, the car door swung opened.

"What the fuck are you guys waiting for? Get in and let's go!"

El looked up and gaped as Lucas's voice rang out, shocked and disbelieving.

Before she could make any sort of move, Max was springing forward out of the shadows. She ran to the side of the van and yanked Lucas out, throwing her arms around his neck and pulling him down to her, pressing her lips against his.

Despite the timing, despite the danger, El felt a grin pulling at her lips.

Finally .

The moment passed, and Max pulled back from the kiss, releasing a dazed Lucas and moving to the front of the van.

El watched as she pushed her hands against where the engine lay, closing her eyes and channeling her powers. Electric blue sparks shot out from where her palms lay pressed against the blue metal. Suddenly, she opened her eyes and whipped the engine door open, moving swiftly to pull out a piece of machinery from inside the van itself.

El watched in fascination as Max yanked out what could only be a tracking device.

Turning around and throwing it as far down the road as she could, Max started scrambling into the driver's seat, shouting at them to hurry up.

They didn't hesitate, instead rushing in and pulling the back doors open, throwing themselves into the mostly-empty van.

A whole side of the interior wall was lined with long benches, seat belts splayed haphazardly against each spot. El didn't know what she was expecting, but she was glad to see there were at least seat belts.

However, as they all piled in, throwing their bags onto the floor of the van, El's eyes widened in horror as she took in the *rest* of the van.

Weapons of varying abilities lined the space on the adjacent wall. Tasers, hammers, mallets, and guns, so many guns, took up the entirety of the van's side, glaring out at her maliciously. El gulped in revulsion as she saw several pairs of metal handcuffs attached to the floor directly underneath the weapons. She knew full-well what those were meant for.

Subconsciously, El started rubbing at her wrists, remembering the icy cut of the cold metal against her skin. Mike noticed this, dropping his own terrified gaze away from the mass weaponry staring out at him and instead taking her trembling hands in his, intertwining their fingers together.

El glanced up at him, and there was no hiding the fear in either of their eyes. Mike's heart squeezed painfully as he saw the recognition written plainly across her face, as if she and these torture tools were old acquaintances meeting up for the first time in a couple years. Gazing at El, he didn't say anything, but he didn't feel like he needed to. At least, not now. No, now wasn't the time.

Dustin broke them out of their thoughts.

"Holy fucking shit! What in the sweet fuck is going on? Lucas, what happened, where's your car?"

Lucas leaned back from where he sat in the passenger seat, facing them all as Max peeled the van out of the back of the apartment building, heading for the highway.

"I-I was walking back to my car when a bunch of guys in black masks pulled me into an alley. T-They injected some sort of...numbing

serum into me, I think, but my body healed itself. I fought back and tased them or some shit a-and then I stole th-their van and I called you guys and...here we are.” He explained hastily, pulling at the threads of the passenger seat armrest. El blanched, her eyes widening as Lucas spoke on.

“Shit...” Dustin swore, his gaze darting between Lucas and the mass weaponry lining the wall.

Lucas nodded, “Yeah. Shit.” He paused, and El couldn’t quite see it from her spot on the bench, but it looked like Max had reached over and was holding his hand. “What happened with you guys? Why were you coming down the fire escape instead of just using the stairs?”

El quickly glanced at Max, hoping she would take this question. When she didn’t move her eyes from the road, El knew it was her job. Mike and Dustin were also looking at her quizzically, and she reminded herself that *they* had no clue what was going on either.

Taking a deep breath, forcing any tears down, she squeezed Mike’s hand and started to explain.

“Y-You guys remember what I told you about Will? About how he could project images and thoughts into other people’s brains?” They nodded. “Well, after we got home, we were sitting in the kitchen,” she explained mainly for Lucas, “a-and one minute we were...y’know...talking and having fun, and the next we weren’t.”

She looked up at their confused faces, wanting nothing more than to plow through the story but knowing they needed to know *everything* .

“I told you guys that those...that the bad people made me...find things...find people, remember?” More nods. “Well, when I do that, I go to...somewhere else in my brain. My body stays put, but my consciousness goes somewhere far away. We call it the Void. It’s dark and black and cold and empty, except for when I’m looking for something.”

The boys just looked more confused as she hastily explained, and she wished that Will was there so he could just *show* them. Her heart

skipped a beat as she realized that it was possible for her to wish things about Will that weren't *I wish he wasn't dead*.

"It's hard to explain, but in the kitchen, W-Will sent us a message. More of a warning, actually."

Mike shot up, "Wait, Will did? I thought he was—"

"Dead?" Max spoke up, eyes still trained on the road as she sped down the highway, "Yeah. We thought so, too." Her voice was hollow, very haunted and far away.

"Shit..." Dustin whispered. El nodded, wanting nothing more than to be done explaining it all.

"Yeah, well he told us that *they* knew where we were a-and who Lucas was and that we needed to run, fast."

"And here we are..." Max echoed Lucas's earlier statement.

"Wait, what about the fire escape? You know, 'emergency exit number one'?" Dustin asked, recalling Max's earlier command. El looked over at the curly-haired boy, her lips twitching up.

"When we first came over for movie night, Max planned out a few emergency escape routes for us. Y'know, in case you guys were murderers or something. South fire exit was number one."

Before they could question further, Max interjected, "Your apartment building has security cameras, we can't let them know we left by walking right out through the front door."

"Shit..." Dustin said again.

"Dude, stop saying that, it's not helping!"

"It's helping me!"

"Well st—"

"Guys!" Mike's exclamation put an end to Dustin and Lucas's bickering. He looked up at Max, squeezing El's hand tighter in his

own. “Where are we going now?”

El let Max take this one, her heart tightening painfully.

“We’re going somewhere safe. It’s our backup location in case anything like this happens.”

“Okay, but where is that?” Lucas interjected nervously.

“Benny’s.” El whispered, looking down sadly at where her fingers were intertwined with Mike’s.

A beat passed.

“...Yeah, we don’t know what that is,” Dustin added on hastily. Max rolled her eyes, tightening her grip on the steering wheel.

“Benny was our only friend before you idiots. He...He lost his life because of us a while back, but his old diner is still safe, it’s off the grid in almost every sense of the word. He has a basement we used to crash in, and a bunch of my old computers. We can regroup there.”

Silence filled the van as they drove along, absorbing this new information. There was something pressing on El’s mind, and she knew she needed to say it, think about it, or *something* before it burst out of her. Lucas beat her to it.

“Will’s alive...what are we gonna do about it?” he voiced quietly. The ‘we’ in his question did not go unnoticed, and suddenly El knew exactly what needed to happen.

Her eyes shot up, and they immediately met Max’s in the rear view mirror. Max’s gaze was set and determined, just as much as El knew her own was as well.

Without hesitating, without stopping to let her fear swell up and fill her mind, El answered his question.

“We’re going to rescue him.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Operation Save Will commences next chapter. Also, I threw in a bit of foreshadowing in the middle there, try and guess what it is :)

If you want to follow me on tumblr btw, you can find me @janes-mike

17. Benny's

The door to his cell slammed open, jerking him out of his restless sleep. Will's eyes shot open, his breathing becoming rapid as several pairs of shoes echoed through the room.

Years of these intrusive awakenings had trained him to get up as quickly as possible, to stand present and alert and ready for instruction, but Will had a feeling he knew what this particular visit was about. As they neared, he shut his eyes again and gripped his pillow tightly, hoping that maybe if they thought he was passed out, they wouldn't bother him.

And just like every other time he'd tried it, they were not fooled.

Instead, Will felt his weak body slam onto the floor as a guard flipped him off the ratty mattress he had been laying on. With a groan, he quickly pulled himself off the floor, his pale arms already aching with bruises where he'd landed on them. Will scrambled up and pressed himself protectively against the adjacent wall, gazing up through heavy, hooded eyes at his visitors.

The large guard with the thick soul patch had been the one to flip him, evidenced by his menacing stance over Will's bed. This didn't come as a surprise, Soul Patch was usually the one sent out to retrieve him, no matter the hour.

Bald Spot stood behind him, gun resting in its holder at his side. Will's eyes flashed to it immediately, his stomach twisting nervously.

Despite the fear he felt swelling in his heart, Will also felt a deep sense of satisfaction. From what he understood, Bald Spot had only gotten special permission to carry a gun after the incident in which Will had forced him to hear voices in his head.

The gun scared Will. It scared him out of his mind. They knew that. Bald Spot was allowed to carry the gun *because* it was the only thing to keep Will from messing with him more.

He could take beatings. He could take the pain and the blows. But

every time he saw that gun settled comfortably in its holster, Will felt his heart twinge in panic. The scars on his chest and the bullet still lodged under his rib reminding him painfully of the damage such a weapon could cause.

Yet deep down, it left him also filled with pride...with hope. As weak as he knew he was, that gun showed him that they were just as scared of him as he was of them.

Staring at it now, Will tried to instill himself with some kind of strength, some kind of show of toughness or power to hide how his hands shook.

Bald Spot and Soul Patch just stared at him malevolently from their spots by his bed, glaring with sly grins.

Will was about to start snarking at them, wondering why he'd been so rudely awakened, when an eerie voice echoed through the doorway.

"Subject twelve..." Will grimaced and pressed himself closer to the wall as Brenner made his way into the room, an evil glint in his eye. He strode forward, both guards stepping out of the way as he neared the bed. "I've just received an odd report from a very trustworthy, very dedicated staff member," he paused, leering. "...It seems you've been breaking the rules."

He eyed the pillow on the bed and Will felt his face pale as the blood rushed down to his bare feet. Brenner nodded his head slightly and Soul Patch moved forward, seizing the pillow and ripping the case off.

As he did so, a dozen small purple pills spilled onto the floor, clattering and rolling around. Will's heavy breathing intensified, his chest rising and falling rapidly as he avoided eye contact.

Shit.

Brenner gazed at him, that wicked smile still painted across his cruel face.

"In case you have forgotten, twelve, the medication *protects* you. It

blocks them, keeps you rooted here, safe from them. Safe from those who would *really* hurt you.” He whispered it with a sneer as he moved around the bed.

As Brenner drew closer, Will slunk to the corner, pressing himself against the cold tile. Shrinking back into the wall, Will wrapped his arms around his torso in an attempt to make himself as small as possible. The air was frigid, and his thin hospital gown didn’t provide much heat, but that wasn’t why he was trembling.

“Hiding your pills....lying to my hardworking staff...” Brenner trailed off, tutting. Will kept his eyes trained to the floor, unable to move even if he wanted to.

“Punishment is in order, I believe...” He took a step closer, now only a foot away. A beat passed, then all of a sudden, a hand was clasped around Will’s jaw, whipping his head up sharply. His pained eyes unwillingly shot up, locking onto Brenner’s cold ones. The hand was tight on Will’s jaw, pressing into a yellowing bruise that was just beginning to heal.

“To... *remind* you of the rules.”

He let go without another word, striding back around the bed and towards the door. “Four days,” he told the guards. “Oh, and leave him in one piece. We’ll be needing him once eleven and thirteen are back in containment.”

Will’s heart skipped at the mention of his friends, his eyes widening fearfully. Soul Patch and Bald Spot rushed forward the second that Brenner was out the door. Will pushed himself further into the wall, hoping that maybe if he pushed hard enough, he’d might just fall through and escape what he knew was coming.

Will flinched as two sets of large, grubby hands clasped roughly around his thin arms, yanking him out of the corner and around the bed.

“C’mon you little fucker, this is going to be *fun* ,” Bald Spot hissed, his nails digging into Will’s pale skin. Will panted heavily, his eyes jumping around as he tried to pull away from their tight hold. He

tried pushing his feet out in front of him, attempting to stop them in their tracks. Will let out a shriek of pain, however, as he received a kick to the shin, forcing his legs to move forward.

Despite his fighting, they dragged him out of the cell and up the hall towards the solitary block.

Shit.

As they got closer, Will's resistance grew stronger, his mind flashing instantly to the painful memories of the *last* time he'd been sent there. He pushed and pulled and struggled in their grasp, but it was no use.

"Stay still, you little bastard!" Soul Patch snarled, trying to reach for his keys as they stopped outside the thick, metal door. Will responded by pulling harder against their grasp, breathing roughly as he used up all his energy.

"Asshole, I said stay still!" He roared again, spit flying in Will's face as he screamed. Will only glared back before lifting a leg and kicking Soul Patch hard in the thigh.

"Fuck!" He swore, tightening his grip ever more. "That's it, hold him back."

Soul Patch let go of Will's arm only for Bald Spot to take hold of it a second later. He pulled Will's arms back behind him, squeezing both wrists painfully in one heavy hand. Will gasped as his arms shot up with white hot pain, his shoulders aching and tearing and surely about to snap.

With panicked breaths, Will watched helplessly as Soul Patch lifted a fist and wound it back before slamming it hard against his face. Stars danced before Will's vision and his eyes filled with tears as the familiar pounding ran through his cheek, an instantaneous swelling starting to form.

He went slack against Bald Spot, giving Soul Patch the opportunity to swing around and open the door to the isolation cell. He pulled it open with a grunt before turning back around, Will blinking slowly

and staring up through his eyelashes. Bald Spot shoved him forward, releasing his wrists. Pushing him through the door, Will fell in a heap on the floor, groaning quietly.

He scrambled forward once again, albeit this time much more sluggishly, to the corner of the small cell, bringing a shaking hand up to hold his aching cheek.

The guards stood smirking in the doorway, pulling the metal clubs out from the handles in their belts.

“Now, let’s start the fun.”

“There it is.”

El’s heart hammered as the van pulled into the parking lot of the diner. Leaning over Lucas in the front seat, she gazed out the windshield, mouth agape as her eyes re-examined the first place she’d ever called home.

The exterior of the diner hadn’t appeared to have changed at all in the two or so years since they’d last visited. The same neon sign hung above the roof, Benny’s name up all lit up. The same posters hung in the windows, depicting various hamburgers and milkshakes. El grinned to herself as she saw the leather booths of every color all pressed up against the walls.

As they slowly drove through the parking lot, El shared a sentimental look with Max, smiling to themselves as the memories all came flooding back.

“So...if the safe spot is in the basement...doesn’t that mean we have to sneak inside and past the employees or something?” Dustin’s quizzical voice broke through their reminiscing. “Like how does this...how does this work?”

El stood up and carefully made her way back to her seat next to Mike.

“Basement is...a loose term, I guess,” El answered as Max pulled the

van around to the back. "It's underground and Benny always just called it the basement. You'll see."

Dustin just nodded in response, leaning back in his seat. The van parked a moment later, and Max swivelled around in the driver's seat before addressing them all.

"Okay, we have to be quiet going in. It's doubtful that anyone would see us or really care at all, but El and I are the only ones who know about this place. So, y'know. Don't draw attention." The three boys nodded quickly in response, standing up in the van and pulling their bags up.

Pushing the back door open, they piled out one by one into the chilly air. The cold bit at their cheeks and the wind whistled through the trees. The diner stood a small distance away, but they'd parked near the wooded area, just out of sight from any onlookers.

El pulled the strap of her bag tighter around her shoulder, waiting for the rest of her friends to pile out of the van.

As she stared in trepidation at the diner, El felt a strong arm sling over her shoulder. Glancing up, she saw Mike's eyes gazing down at her. She pressed her head against his shoulder and roped her own arm around his waist, squeezing gently.

"You alright?" He whispered against her hair. El only nodded, not sure if she'd be able to articulate the rush of emotions flowing through her. Mike squeezed her shoulder in response, and El felt the love bubbling up inside her. The only thing keeping her from spiraling into a panic was the fact that Mike was right by her side. Having him so close made her feel grounded, more brave and secure than she would've been without him.

Max stepped out, shutting the door behind her.

"Ready?" She asked.

They all grunted in affirmation before setting off, Max leading the way. Quietly striding to the back of the building, Mike's arm holding her close to him, El couldn't help but feel the surrealness of the

moment. Benny's had always been just for her and Max, always. Bringing Mike and Dustin and Lucas in felt like they were breaking new ground, allowing other people to enter a deeper part of their lives for the first time ever.

"It's over there," El whispered to the boys, "On the ground next to the generator. Max set up a ton of security systems, so give it a minute." As she neared the back of the building, Max strode forward, taking her bag off her shoulder and setting it on the ground.

Wordlessly, she knelt next to the large generator, pressing her palms to the ground. No one spoke a word as Max worked, keeping their promise to remain quiet.

With a spark of electricity, they suddenly heard a series of beeps as well as several locks clicking. El grinned as Max stood once more, her combat boots scraping against the rocks laying on the small metal door she'd just unlocked. Leaning down, she clasped onto the rough handle, pulling it up and open, revealing the ladder descending down into the basement.

El glanced up and smiled at awestruck looks on each of the boys' faces, particularly Lucas, who was gazing at Max as if she brought the sun up each morning.

"Holy shit, that's fucking insane. *This* is fucking insane." Dustin whispered excitedly as he peered down the ladder. Mike and Lucas nodded in agreement as Max snatched her bag off the ground, leaning down and starting to climb down the ladder.

Pausing as she got halfway down, Max's gaze snapped up, her eyebrows furrowing.

"Well? What are you waiting for? C'mon down!"

Moving in a collective flurry, the four of them scrambled after Max, climbing down the ladder and into the basement one by one.

As El made her way down, her sneakers hitting the familiar tile, a musty smell filled her senses, the dim lighting of the basement impairing her vision as well.

“Max-”

“Yep, already on it,” she heard the redhead call out, followed by some rustling and more sparks of electric blue energy. El pulled the sleeves of her jacket over her fingers and moved slowly out of the way of the ladder as Mike climbed down. As his feet hit the ground behind her, the lights in the basement sparked on, illuminating the small room.

It was just as they’d left it. Two long couches sat pressed against the walls, blankets thrown haphazardly and pillows strewn about from the morning they’d left. Unopened cans lay on on the counter next to the small sink, abandoned. A round table with three chairs sat in the middle of the small room. A few pairs of old sneakers and boots sat by the wall, just where they’d left them.

Max sat crouched in the corner, having crawled underneath the small desk to start the power up. Computer consoles and old hard drives sat squished on top of and next to the desk, a thin layer of dust covering the tops.

El took a few steps forward in the basement, overwhelmed with familiarity. She slowly walked over to the corner where the door to the bathroom sat. Pressed up against the adjacent wall was the bookcase that Benny had made her from nothing more than scrap wood and a few nails.

She remembered it so vividly. They’d been staying in the basement for about a month, and her speaking skills had been lacking. She just didn’t know how to tell anyone what she wanted, the words just...didn’t work. It was around this time that in lieu of her vocal abilities, El had become an avid reader. Max’s tutoring brought her reading level up steadily, and by the time they were with Benny, she couldn’t stop devouring book after book.

One day, as the (stolen) books began to pile up in the corner, Benny had grunted to himself about needing more space. The next day, after El and Max had returned from the small neighboring town nearby, Benny had sat crouched in the corner, hammering away ceaselessly at the wooden shelving.

Gazing at it now, El couldn't believe he hadn't nailed himself in the hand. She ran a trembling hand across the top, wiping away the thick layer of dust that had formed.

Benny had been an incredibly kind individual, a person with a heart so good that he would take in two scroungy runaways without blinking an eye. He'd been an incredible friend, a solid foundation, and an *amazing* cook.

El smiled to herself now as she remembered the confusion she'd felt when she saw what he was making. There had been no bookshelves in the facility, and the only other times she'd seen them were in libraries or in bookstores.

El had been under the impression that bookshelves were very professional, very sophisticated pieces of furniture, and that not many people had them.

But Benny had made one for her, with his own two hands and of his own volition. El remembered the tears, the excitement as they stacked her (stolen) books by color. She remembered the hug she'd given him, the first show of physical affection she'd been comfortable giving to *anyone* .

Running her fingers along their spines now, El felt her eyes glistening with tears. A sad sort of melancholy rushing through her. So much had changed since then, so much good, so much bad.

El was lost in thought and jumped slightly as a voice spoke behind her.

"Are those all yours?" It was Mike, watching her with a loving fascination.

El smiled softly. "Yeah," she whispered.

"Okay. Let's talk about this for a second," Max said from her spot leaning back against the desk. They'd settled in enough, it was time to talk everything through. Have the conversation they all knew needed to happen.

El nodded and sat down at one of the plastic chairs tucked under the table.

“I want to make it very clear, especially to you two,” Max pointed at Dustin and Mike from their spots on the floor as she spoke. “That you absolutely do *not* need to help us. Lucas, you’re kinda stuck for now, but I could eventually get you some fake identification, and then you’d be good to go.” El grinned sullenly as she leaned twirled her fingers absentmindedly. “But they don’t know about you two, as far as we know, so this is your chance to get out while you can. Going back in, rescuing Will, it comes with a fair amount of risk and danger. El and I won’t think any less of any of you if you don’t want to be a part of that. We couldn’t possibly be upset considering we’re the reason you all got dragged into this in the first place.”

El grimaced, the guilt just piling on. A silence echoed through the basement, and El was about to start assuring them that they’d be able to steal a car to get them back home, when Dustin spoke up.

“Are you kidding? We’re *so* in.”

El looked up quickly, locking eyes with Mike. Pulling at a thread on her sweater, she started in.

“I-I don’t know if you guys understand. This is...this is a lot. Not even considering the danger that’s at stake here, you’re dropping your *lives* right now for us. A-And Mike, your internship, you worked *so hard* for it a-and-”

“And it doesn’t start for another two months,” Mike answered, standing up and crouching in front of her. “The semester is done. The coffee shop will operate without us for a while. *We’re in* . We’re here for you guys, we’re with you on anything.” He took her nervous hands in his, squeezing gently before turning to Max. “Whatever you want us to do, we’re in.”

El watched Max smile trepidly, hesitance in her gaze. “Are you positive you want to do this?”

Mike turned to beam back at El, a look of fierce dedication and determination flashing across his soft features.

“Absolutely.”

Resounding grunts sounded off behind him, Dustin and Lucas agreeing instantly.

“Okay then.” Max pushed off the desk and sat down across from El at the table, a resolute look settled into her features. “Let’s figure this out.”

Everyone got the hint, moving closer to the table so that they could all work together. Dustin and Lucas pulled one of the couches up to the table, Mike taking the last plastic chair next to El.

“Lucas,” Max turned to him, “do you remember *anything* that the guards said while they attacked you? Any location, any names, anything that stuck out?”

El watched as Lucas scratched his chin, his brow furrowing.

“After they injected me with that...stuff, they were talking about overtime hours and pay and stuff.” He rubbed his hands against his cheeks, clearly deep in thought. “Oh! And they mentioned someone named Brenner! Does that ring any bells?”

El went stiff as Brenner’s name spilled out, and for a flash she was in the facility again, freezing as she sat opposite that wretched man, his piercing gaze burning holes through her head.

However, a hand squeezed her own and she was back in the basement. A quick look to her left and she was warm again, Mike’s loving eyes gazing softly into her own. El scooted her chair closer to his, intertwining their fingers and squeezing back.

“...Yeah, it does help actually.” Max answered, her voice more hollow than before. She slowly turned to the group. “I don’t know if El told you about it, but a few months ago I...I kinda stole a couple hundred of gigabytes of data from that technology institute Intex. Don’t ask why, it’s too long of a story, but I’ve been sorting through everything for a while and I think I’ve got the basic layout for a few possible locations.”

The boys all stared at her impressed as she spoke on.

"If Brenner's there, and if they have only enough staff that overtime pay is being allowed, then that narrows down the list considerably." Max explained before pausing, appearing to suddenly be lost in thought.

El frowned, Max hadn't told her any of this. She knew about Intex and about the data, but she didn't know that Max had been slowly working to pinpoint the *exact* location of the facility. But before she could touch on this, Max glanced up, her eyes immediately jumping to El's.

"There's really only one way to find out for sure where Will's being kept."

The look of trepidation glinting in her eyes made El's heart drop. She started slowly shaking her head.

"Max, it's *never* worked before. Will, h-he-"

"He spoke to us just a few hours ago, El." Max interrupted. "He found us and warned us through the Void. He's out there, we know it. *Somehow* he was able to get there on his own, so there *has* to be some way for you to find him."

The boys all remained quiet as they watched the exchange, only half-understanding what was going on.

El frowned, staring nervously at the table. Then Mike started rubbing his thumb against her hand, and she felt a bit braver.

"...Okay, I'll try." She shut her eyes, listening to the silence filling the basement and allowing Mike's gentle touch to lull her into a deeper state.

Opening her eyes with a jolt, El wasn't in the basement anymore. An eerie sense of loneliness settled over her as it always did when she visited the Void, a queasy ache pulling at her stomach.

Walking slowly across the wet ground, El took a deep breath before focusing all of her thoughts, all of her energy on Will, on any and all memories she held of him.

Normally, this left a bitter taste in her mouth, the weight of their mistakes pushing on her shoulders. El always felt so guilt-ridden when she had been trying to see his body, but now...now she wasn't looking for his *body* . No, now she was looking for *him* , alive and well.

He's alive. He's alive. He's alive. He's alive.

She repeated the mantra over and over, both in her head and out loud. Closing her eyes, El said it again and again, thinking only of the kind face of her first friend.

All of a sudden, a sharp wheezing pierced the once-silent echo of the Void.

El eye's shot open as she whirled around, looking for the source of the noise. A strangled gasp broke out of her as her gaze landed on a body lying a few feet from her.

Will.

El tore across the Void to him, eyes wide and breaths coming out in heavy gasps. Falling roughly to her knees, she leaned over Will, careful not to touch him as she knew he'd vanish in a puff of smoke.

"Will! Will! Oh my god Will! Oh my god....oh my god!"

He'd grown significantly in the five years since she'd seen him last. Even as he lay curled up on the ground, El guessed that he might even be as tall as Lucas or Mike now. His hair was still buzzed, though it appeared to have grown out enough that small tufts stuck up in the back.

El's mind flew quickly over these small details, however, as she took in the rest of him.

The hospital gown he adorned was *covered* in blood.

Staring at him horrified, El took in the massive purple welts climbing up his too-thin arms, the cuts and gashes strewn about his wrists and forearms, as if he'd been holding them up in self-defense. Tears formed in her eyes as she moved her gaze to his legs, where a similar

sight awaited her.

“Oh my god, Will...” El whispered, raising a hand to cover her mouth as she looked into his face.

The memory she had of him, of the kind, patient boy who’d walked her through the first steps of friendship was unrecognizable compared to the boy who sat curled in a ball in front of her now.

One of Will’s eyes was swollen shut, the other purpling all around. A deep, rough cut ran across his cheekbone, blood slowly spilling out and dripping down his neck. A yellowing lump sat prominently on his forehead, a matching one adorning the left side of his jaw. His bottom lip was split in two different places, his upper in one. Blood dripped from his nose as well. Will’s mouth hung open as he lay down, allowing him to let out slow, wheezy breaths.

El gaped in horror at the shell of her friend, of the thin, pale beaten down ghost of Will Byers. Her own breaths came out in short, raspy bouts, and she knew she wouldn’t be able to hold on much longer. Reaching a hand out, she had to stop herself from touching him.

El pulled all her power forward, throwing it at Will’s crumpled form.

“Will...Will, please hear me. Please, listen to me. We’re coming for you, we’re going to get you out of there, I *promise* . We’re coming Will, we’re coming for you.” She pleaded, desperate beyond anything she’d felt before, needing for him to hear her.

El’s heart stuttered as Will slowly opened his one good eye, seemingly looking right at her.

“...Hurry...”

And she was back in the basement.

El let out a terrified cry as her eyes shot open and started darting around quickly, the light of the room flooding her senses. She was breathing too fast again, and she felt light-headed but she couldn’t just stop and fix it. Not when the image of Will’s beaten body was paralyzing her every thought.

El jumped out of her seat, stumbling back and nearly falling onto the floor in a heap.

“El!”

“What happened?”

“Are you okay?”

“Did you find him?”

Her friends were standing now too, shooting questions at her from all sides. El stared up, finding Max’s eyes instantly. She let out another cry and threw her hands over her mouth, not sure if she’d be able to articulate what she’d just seen.

“Hey, hey you’re okay, you’re safe here.” Mike was quickly striding to her side, wrapping an arm around her back and was holding her up. El leaned into his touch, feeling her jittering heart quell.

Taking in giant breaths, El slowed her breathing enough to speak.

“I...I’m safe,” she panted, “Will’s....Will’s not safe.” Her eyes glistened as she pictured the bruises running along his thin arms. She looked up to Max.

“He’s not....Will’s not okay, he’s hurt...hurt really bad.” She let out a sob unwillingly, her face crumpling. “He’s hurt s-so bad, he could barely breathe. They beat him...so bad, Max, so bad.”

She couldn’t say anymore, the tears were falling too fast and she couldn’t catch her breath.

Mike instantly pulled her into his arms, wrapping her up tightly and pressing her face into the crook of his neck. He started whispering reassurances in her ear but El couldn’t help how much she was shaking. She pushed herself into him as she sobbed, her own arms gripping the back of his shirt with all the force she had left.

Maybe if she stayed right there in Mike’s arms it would all go away. Maybe it would all work out and everyone would be safe, safe, safe.

Max was talking. El could hear her voice but she couldn't make out any of the words, couldn't process anything but the image of her beaten-down friend laying helpless in a cell somewhere all alone.

Mike was speaking now, not to her, she didn't think, but she felt the hum of his voice vibrating against her. A few pairs of footsteps clattered around her, followed by what sounded like the main door opening and closing once more, and then there was nothing.

Braving what may wait for her when she pulled back, El slowly lifted her head from Mike's shoulder and peered around. They were the only two in the basement from what she could tell, Max, Dustin, and Lucas appearing to have gone back up.

"W-Where'd they go?" El asked, her voice raspy. Mike was staring at her, she could feel the heat of his gaze on her face. She couldn't look at him though, afraid she'd break down again.

"They went to check the van for any clues. But...El..." She slowly looked up and suddenly Mike's eyes were all she could see. His eyebrows were pulled together with concern and he was gazing intently down at her. Slowly, he lifted a hand to cup her cheek. "El, we're going to find him. We're going to get him out. Lucas will heal him and...and he'll be okay."

Mike's thumb rubbed gently over her cheekbone, and El felt terrified and scared but loved loved loved loved loved loved.

Instead of responding, as if she was in any capacity to do so at the moment, El snaked her hands up to the back of Mike's neck and gently pulled him down, his lips meeting her waiting ones.

She kissed him with everything she had left. Everything she had in her life, she was giving him. Mike wrapped his arms tighter around her small waist and kissed her back just as intensely, lifting her up onto her toes.

Breaking away after a moment, El softly rested her forehead against his, her face still wet from tears. Their eyes were closed and their breathing shallow but for the moment they were the only two in the world.

A beat passed before El spoke again.

“I love you so much,” she whispered through the silence of the basement. “I-I don’t know if I’m strong enough for this.”

Mike responded by pulling her into his arms again, holding her close to his chest. El smiled weakly as she felt his heartbeat against her own.

“You’re the strongest person I know. You can do this. *We* can do this.” He paused, pulling back to look her in the eye. “I’ll be right by your side the whole time. I promise.”

El’s eyes watered again and god she was so *tired* of crying, but this time it was okay.

“Promise?”

He nodded, pulling her against him again.

“Promise.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Enjoy the cute moments, they stop here unfortunately.

18. In Deep Shit

Notes for the Chapter:

You're welcome and I'm sorry.

None of it had been part of her plan.

When they'd escaped all those years ago, when she'd seen Will drop dead, Max had made a promise to herself that safety and security would be her number one priority from then on out. Her only priorities really.

In order to do that, she'd also promised herself that she wouldn't allow *anyone* to get close enough to hurt El, or to hurt her.

And for years she'd been successful. They were alone, but happy, no one knew about them and they weren't betraying Will's memory by drawing attention to themselves. They were safe, her plan was working. That is, until El started going to that stupid coffee shop.

Friends had never been part of the plan.

These dumbass boys had never been part of the plan.

Lucas had never been part of the plan.

Yet driving along the dark rainy highway, Max couldn't help glancing back to catch glimpses of Dustin nodding off, his hair bouncing haphazardly as the van drove further west.

Max couldn't help but smile at how Mike was firmly holding El to his side, gazing at her the way everyone wanted to be gazed at.

She couldn't help but beam as she glanced down at her own hand clasping tighter onto Lucas's as he drove.

And then Max couldn't help but feel eternally grateful that these dumbass boys would now and forever be a part of her plan.

Laying her head against the back of the passenger seat, rubbing

mindless shapes over the back of Lucas's palm, Max closed her eyes and ran over everything they'd learned in the past few hours.

After El found Will in the Void, after they'd learned of his less-than-okay state, after they'd given Mike and El some space so that he could help calm her down, Lucas and Max had done a more thorough inspection of the van. Just in case there were clues that could narrow down her possible list of locations.

Not because Max had intentionally sent Dustin to grab them some food, giving her and Lucas the few minutes of alone time that they craved.

No.

Not at all.

After a few minutes of talking, and another few minutes of *not* talking, she and Lucas had started inspecting for real, digging through every inch of the van as they looked for clues.

As it turned out, the van was a legally registered vehicle from the state of Indiana, as the licensing papers they found in the glove box indicated. It only took a few minutes for Max to cross-examine her list of locations to find where exactly the van had come from.

The hours afterwards had been a blur.

Max and Lucas had rushed back down to the basement, hurrying over to the desk so that Max could power up her computer systems to try and find the floorplan of this new facility.

She'd worked fast, motivated by the empty, haunted look in El's eyes. The same one Max had seen her wear the *first* time Will had died.

Itching at the scars running up and down her arms, Max'd tried not to think about all the ways she'd been hurt in the past, about how that was *still* happening to Will, how it had been happening to him all along, about how he was hurt and dying and needed help.

Downloading her most valuable files onto the old computer software, Max'd sped through the information, looking for floor plans and

security details.

As it turned out, ‘working’ at Intex for all those months had panned out in her favor. No matter how much of a pain in the ass it had been, Max knew the hours of research had been worth it.

Intex *was* a technological institute, and they *were* constantly investing billions of dollars in various scientific and mathematical endeavours, but just as Max had suspected, the multinational company also had a vested interest in more...supernatural experimentation.

Weaponizing this supernatural experimentation, to be more specific.

It hadn’t taken her very long at all to put two and two together, to make the connections and find out *who* was heading the division focusing on this weaponization. Max hadn’t been surprised in the slightest when she saw it, yet it still made a chill run through her spine as she recalled the moment Brenner’s name had popped up under the list of employees.

Finding floor plans and security schedules had proved to be a bit of a challenge, as she was using hard drives that hadn’t been touched in years. It had taken Max a solid hour of scouring to find reliable information but once she had, she’d presented her findings to the group, and they began planning.

It was a good plan, a solid plan, a plan that would work if everything went smoothly. But the last time Max had made a plan, it had lost them Will.

Opening her eyes and running a nervous hand through her crimson hair, Max felt the familiar ache of nerves and anxiety pooling in her stomach. The one she’d felt endlessly in those final days at the facility, waiting for her chance to escape.

She couldn’t lose them. Any of them.

If anything went wrong, it would be her fault entirely, and Max didn’t know if she could live with that guilt *again*.

Mike gently traced shapes on El's arm as she slept, her head resting against his shoulder, a frown painted on her otherwise peaceful face. The van trudged slowly along the road, bumps on the dirt path jostling the van every which way.

He kept his arm wrapped tightly around her, fearing the moment that he knew was coming much sooner than he'd have liked.

El had miraculously been able to fall asleep during the trip west, her head lolling gently before falling limply on his shoulder. She needed rest, he knew it, they all knew it. The plan relied heavily on her abilities and her strength, so it was best to let her rest, recharge.

Mike was more than happy to let her sleep, to give her the time to forget about the horrifying things she'd seen in that...place.

Nerves gnawed at his chest as he ran over the plan again and again, trying to reassure himself that she would be okay, that they would be able to go in, get Will, and get out without a scratch. Max had been very convincing, and as long as everything went according to plan, it would all work out.

As long as everything went according to plan.

He frowned to himself as he stared out the back window of the van, pulling El a little closer as they neared their destination.

As they hit a particularly rough bump, El stirred a bit, pushing herself closer against him. Mike just gazed down at her, falling in love again and again. Falling in love with how her lips pursed in a pout even as she slept, with how her slim fingers were clasped around his own, with how her head fit perfectly against his neck.

His mind drifted back to the cabin, to holding her right up against him as the light from the window danced across their skin, to feeling the rise and fall of her chest against his own, to the soft kisses and gentle smiles that filled him up with radiant happiness.

She was perfect. She was the dream he'd never allowed himself to want.

Unfortunately, she was also the dream that could possibly be ripped

away from him in the coming hours.

“Okay. Park right up here.”

Max’s determined voice echoed through the quiet van, jarring Mike out of his thoughts. From next to him, Dustin started stirring awake, his hat laying haphazardly on his wild hair. Lucas followed Max’s instruction, pulling the van under the cover of some trees before shutting it off and turning on the interior lights.

Max spun around in her seat, taking a deep breath and nodding at Mike before climbing through the van to her vast array of computers stacked up aimlessly in the corner.

Mike got the hint, sighing gently before pressing a slow kiss to the top of El’s head, not wanting the moment to end.

“Hey, hey El. El, it’s time to wake up. Time to go.” She stirred lightly, mumbling incoherently under her breath before wriggling closer to him. Mike’s lips twitched up, wanting nothing more than to let her sleep, or better yet to take her as far away from all of this danger as possible. But that wasn’t an option, he knew that.

“El, love, I’m sorry but you’ve gotta wake up,” he whispered against her ear, running a hand through her dark curls.

Slowly, she lifted her head off of his shoulder, blinking wearily into the light of the van. Her hand stayed clasped in his, and he didn’t say anything more, instead watching her face as the memories faded back into view, the dire reality of the situation settling in.

Mike’s heart twinged as her frown deepened, that hollowed out, haunted look dimming the light in her eyes once more.

“Hey,” he whispered gently, “Will’s going to be fine. Everyone’s going to be fine. The plan is rock solid, it will work, I know it.” Mike was glad his voice sounded more confident than he felt. El replied only with a tight-lipped smile, her eyes darting from their intertwined hands to his eyes and back down again quickly.

“Okay. We’re just about set up over here,” Max spoke up as she assembled the computer systems, electric blue sparks shooting out

from her palms as she used her powers to get everything booted up.

Mike and Dustin nodded sullenly, glancing over her shoulder to see exactly what they'd be working with.

"Mike..." He heard El whisper softly against his ear, her breath tickling his skin. He turned his head and they locked eyes, hers so filled with trepidation, his hopefully not reflecting the panic he felt inside.

"Mike, I-I love you," she whispered it like a secret, "I love you so much. And...I-I just want you to know that, y'know just...just in case, that you mean the absolute wo-"

"Hey, hey, hey," he cut her off, his heart thumping wildly, "El, that sounds like a goodbye. We aren't saying goodbye. We're only saying...we're only saying see you later! Because this is not final. This is not the end, this is not forever. This is just tonight."

She grinned at him, but it didn't reach her eyes.

"Okay," Max stood up and turned around to face them, her eyes steely, "Lucas, El, start getting geared up. Dustin, Mike, let me show you how to work this shit."

Mike nodded, releasing his grasp on El as they both stood up, El making her way to the array of weapons hung against the wall while Mike ambled over to the computer setup, Dustin at his side.

"Once we make the connection, you'll have full audio and visual. I'm going to rig up a looped recording for the actual security tapes that are in the building. It won't work all night, but it will do for an hour or so. One of you will have to walk us through the building from the maps that are accessible here," she pointed at a microphone and one of the screens, before gesturing to another. "While the other will have to allow us access through the wireless system as we go, as well as monitor the security cameras to make sure we aren't being detected or followed."

Dustin and Mike nodded, both fully knowing that Dustin would be working the more difficult of the two jobs seeing as he was much

more tech savvy than Mike.

Max pulled out a pair of headsets from behind the screens. "These are for you guys to talk to us with. I'm pretty sure we're far enough away from the actual building that the frequency won't be picked up, but be on the lookout just in case. If anything goes wrong, drive about a half-mile south to that abandoned gas station and we'll meet you there. Got it?"

They nodded, absorbing all the information while trying to settle their nerves.

"Okay," Max sighed again, strapping her protective gear tightly around her chest. "I think we're ready to go."

As Dustin quietly opened the back door, allowing the light of the van to seep out into the pitch black darkness, Mike locked eyes with El again, his chest aching painfully.

She looked as if she was half-dead. Her eyes sat sunken into her skull, dark bags hanging under them. El was small by many standards, likely from years of malnutrition, but as the huge black protective gear lay around her small shoulders, she looked as if she was going to be swallowed up whole.

Max and Lucas moved out of the van first, exchanging weapons and strapping flashlights to their belts. El ambled after them, trudging slowly. Mike noticed she wasn't grabbing any weapons herself, and he was about to speak up before he remembered she probably didn't need to use anything more than her mind.

Mike followed her out of the van, gently stepping onto the dirt path after her. Without saying anything, he sighed heavily and pulled her back into his arms, his chin resting against the top of her head.

The protective gear made it difficult for him to hold her the way he wanted to, but that might've been for the best. If he'd had a stronger grip, Mike might've just picked her up and run away forever.

"Not goodbye, just see you later," he whispered softly. El was trembling against him, her fingers gripping tightly at the back of his

jacket.

Mike allowed himself this minute more, this last hug, this last connection before god knows what started. It was muffled against his neck, but El responded, her voice distant and far away.

“See you...see you later.”

Mike pulled back, gazing down softly at her as she gently reached up a hand to cup his cheek. Mike swooped down instantly, capturing her lips with his. He let himself soak her in, memorizing every detail. Tangling his hands in her hair and pulling her as close as space would allow.

The moment ended far too quickly, Lucas’s hesitant voice breaking the bubble.

“El, we have to go before the night shift is off. It’s now or never.”

They pulled back, staring at one another helplessly. El’s lips twitched up, and Mike felt a surge of hope shoot through him.

“See you later,” she said with more confidence than before. Mike nodded, hesitantly dropping her hands and backing up to the van’s open door, his sneakers kicking up dust.

“See you later.”

“Okay, El. Whenever you’re ready.”

El nodded silently, her eyes focused only on the small security office standing in front of the massive gate. There was only the one guard on duty, a bald, older man staring mindlessly at the screen in front of him.

Pulling up an inch of her powers, El slowly lifted the coffee mug from behind him before bringing it down with a *SMASH* against his head. The guard dropped instantly, falling face-first against his small desk.

Max bounded forward at once, rushing to the small office and

pushing the unconscious guard out of the way. El and Lucas watched hopefully from the bushes as sparks of energy shot out around her, the light of the computer screen illuminating her determined face.

A crackle sounded in her ear, and then Max's voice was ringing through the earpiece.

"Do you guys copy? Can you hear me?"

A beat.

"We can hear you!" It was Mike, and El instantly felt her heart tremble, his voice settling her nerves slightly.

"Awesome, okay, I'm connecting you to the main servers....now!" A particularly bright set of sparks spilled out from the miniscule office, and Lucas took a hesitant step forward, seemingly worried.

The sparks stopped and a beat passed before, "We're in! I can see everything!" Dustin this time, his voice still cheery despite the gravity of the situation.

"Great, I'm opening the main gate now and then we're going to go in through the service entrance. After that, you two have to lead us through."

As Max's voice rang through her ears, the main gate did indeed open up. El and Lucas quickly stood up from their crouched positions before breaking out into runs as they hustled over to where Max waited.

None of them spoke as they rushed up the small hill and around the back, keeping their heads low despite the lack of light protecting anyone from seeing them.

"We're coming up to the service entrance, is anyone inside?" Lucas whispered quietly, the still air broken only by crickets sounding off nearby. El swayed nervously from foot to foot, her heart beating wildly as they stood outside the door.

"Nobody inside. Go ahead." Dustin answered immediately.

Without wasting a second, El unlocked the door with a twitch of her head, Lucas yanking the handle and pulling the door open as soon as they heard the click.

El went first, hand raised in front of her just in case, her powers more alert and ready at the surface than ever before. Max followed at her side, Lucas behind the two of them, guns raised cautiously as they quietly made their way down the hall.

“Okay, you’re coming up to a split hallway, turn right and follow it all the way until you reach a set of doors.” It was Mike again, and El felt just a bit stronger.

Slowly, the three of them walked down the hall, following Mike’s instructions and taking each step carefully and vigilantly.

“Good, good, okay go through the doors and head down the stairs. You’re currently at the ground level, so you’ll have to go down three flights to reach the confinement areas.”

El closed her eyes for a moment and imagined that Mike was standing there with her, just talking in her ear like normal. Not like this.

“Wait! Wait! You’ve got two guards coming around the corner in a few seconds! Get into the supply closet to your right! Hurry!” Dustin’s frantic voice rang out through their earpieces. Lucas moved first, ripping the door to their right open immediately and pulling both Max and El through. He closed the door quickly, but made sure not to slam so that they wouldn’t be detected.

The three of them stood breathless in the dark closet, waiting with twisting stomachs for more instructions.

A few minutes passed, a few minutes that they didn’t have, before Dustin spoke up again.

“Okay, you guys are good. Head down the stairs fast, you’ve got a clear shot from what I can see.”

None of them hesitated, pulling the door open silently and rushing down through the doors and down the winding staircase. El counted

one floor, two floors, three floors before ripping the door open and hurtling into one of her nightmares.

Despite the fact they were in a different building completely, the containment area was *extremely* similar to the one she'd been imprisoned in for so many years. Cold tile floors giving off absolutely no heat or comfort, pale glowing lights flickering ceaselessly, rows and rows of locked doors. It was like she'd stepped into the past, willingly this time.

Max seemed to be having the same dilemma, her icy blue eyes darting around the walls with a panicked look on her face.

Lucas, not noticing this, pushed forward, glancing back for only a moment as if to ask why they'd stopped.

Snapping out of their dazed, horrifying memories, El and Max moved forward, keeping their eyes locked on the floor, their boots echoing on the cold tile.

"Which one?" El asked quietly, her soft voice sounding too loud in the quiet hallway.

Dustin answered instantly, "The last door on the left. Hurry."

El's stomach dropped. Dustin and Mike could see into Will's cell, and judging by the tone of the former's voice, what was waiting for them wasn't going to be good. She quickened her pace, the hallway seeming to stretch and grow longer and longer as they hurried.

Finally, *finally*, they came to a stop in front of the last cell door on the left. El's heart was going to beat right out of her chest, she knew it. He was there, this was it, it was working.

Her hand shaking tremendously, El focused her mind and completely broke the locks keeping the cell door in place with only a jerk of her head.

Max lunged forward and ripped the door open, light flooding the small, dark room.

He was there, lying in the same position she'd seen him in only hours

before, only now in real life. In horrifyingly real life.

“Will!”

“Do you hear that?” Mike asked, pushing one side of his headset off his ear. Dustin turned for a moment, wrapped up entirely in the security feed as their friends moved through the hallways.

“What?”

“Do you hear that?” Mike repeated, staring nervously out the back window. Dustin froze for a moment, listening closely for any foreign noises coming from outside the van. When nothing came, he just shook his head, quickly turning back to the computer screens.

“You’re just jumpy, nothing’s there.”

Mike frowned, his heart thumping as he furrowed his brow. Right as he was about to pull his headset back on, he heard it again. Rustling in the trees surrounding the van.

“Dude, I definitely heard something,” Mike whispered, staring out the window. Trying to see anything from inside the van was pointless, seeing as it was dark outside, but he was *sure* he heard something odd, something unfamiliar. Mike waited another moment, listening intently.

“There it is again!” He whisper-shouted at Dustin, who took his eyes off the screen for only a second to shoot him a ‘not right now’ look. Mike blanched, his stomach dropping as he heard it again, louder this time.

“Dustin...” he started, but his curly-haired friend was uttering to himself as he watched the security cameras, following the floor plan with one finger and tracing the corresponding pattern on the screens. Mike huffed before making his way over to the weapons hanging on the wall. He quickly pulled off one of the long, metallic tasers, twisting it around in his hand, checking to make sure it worked.

Mike turned to Dustin, grabbing a flashlight from off the floor. “I’ll be

right back, I'm gonna go see what it is. Keep an eye on them." Dustin grunted in response, continuing to mutter instructions into the microphone.

"Will!" El fell forward, collapsing onto her knees in front of his broken body. Her eyes were wide and filled with panic panic panic because he looked *so much worse* in real life.

"Holy shit, oh fuck, oh fuck Will, oh fuck," Max panted, matching El's movements and falling to the ground next to her.

Will had gotten increasingly pale since she'd seen him in the Void only a few hours before. Dangerously pale. No-blood-circulating-through-your-body pale.

His nearly translucent skin only made the cuts and bruises on his arms and legs more prominent. It seemed like he was more purple and blue than anything else.

Will's eye was still swollen shut, the lumps and cuts on his jaw, forehead, and lips had apparently stopped bleeding a while ago. But as El glanced down and saw that she was *sitting* in a pool of his blood, she decided that wasn't a good thing.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, *fuck* ," Max breathed, her voice shaking heavily. She leaned forward and slowly pulled Will up into a sitting position, his back pressed limply against the wall.

As Max pulled him up, Will let out a low, painful groan, his head drooping onto his chest and his eyes remaining slammed shut. El let out a raspy sob as the noise echoed through the cell, and all of a sudden Will was *alive* .

He was *alive* , he was *there* , he was right in front of them, bleeding and bruised and beaten within half an inch of his life but *alive and breathing* nonetheless.

Her profound moment was broken quickly though as Will let out another, *louder* groan, before coughing violently, blood spilling out of his mouth and onto the tiled floor.

“L-Lucas help him!” El called desperately, pushing herself out of the way to make room. El watched frantically as Lucas pushed past her and Max, crouching down next to Will and dropping his weapons.

Lucas took hold of the top of Will’s hospital gown, pulling it down his chest a bit. Max and El held onto each other and watched in absolute horror as more and more and more bruises were uncovered, all varying in sizes and color but *none* of them looking good.

“Shit...” Lucas whispered.

El wanted to cry, she needed to cry, but her body wouldn’t let her do anything more than to just stare helplessly as Lucas closed his eyes and pressed a strong hand against Will’s chest.

A moment flickered passed slowly. *So* slowly. And then, the bruises began to fade.

Max let out a soft gasp, and in the back of her mind, El remembered that Max hadn’t ever seen Lucas heal someone before.

Lucas let out a shuddering breath as he worked, moving his hands around Will’s chest and stomach, apparently healing the big spots first. But just as he lifted his hands to move them to Will’s head, Dustin’s voice rang out through their earpieces.

“Four guards coming! They’re about six floors up, but they’re moving fast. You guys have to get out of there!”

El’s frantic gaze darted to Lucas and Will, still immobile on the floor, Max seemed to be doing the same. Luckily, Lucas spoke up before either of them could panic, his eyes shooting open.

“He’s good enough to move for now. There’s....there’s *a lot* of damage. I wouldn’t be able to do it all here anyways. Let’s get the hell out so I can finish.”

El and Max didn’t need to be told twice.

Max moved to Will’s other side, she and Lucas pulling him up and slinging his arms around their shoulders. El moved in front of them, adrenaline rushing back into her veins, forcing her powers back up to

the surface.

One hand extended out, El rushed forward out of the cell and down the hall, not looking back but completely trusting that her friends were behind her.

Mike trudged through the dark canopy of the trees, flashlight held out in front of him. In the back of his head, Mike knew he was just being paranoid, he knew that Dustin was right and that he was just being jumpy. But still, he had to find out.

Spinning around to look back, Mike was glad to see that the van was still in sight. Getting lost out in the woods was *not* part of the plan, and he would feel like a colossal idiot if he screwed anything up by acting on his suspicions.

Mike took a few more steps forward in the woods, his flashlight darting around the dark trunks, looking for the source of the rustling. Despite what he thought may happen, the noises hadn't stopped when he'd come outside, in fact, they'd had only gotten louder.

He stepped out into a clearing, the light of the moon illuminating the field just enough for Mike to see the small pond in the distance. Squinting his eyes, he walked further, the noises getting louder and louder as he got closer to the pond.

Taking slow steps, keeping his breathing low and steady, Mike flashed the light onto a bush at the edge of the water.

His heart leapt right out of his chest and he jumped back with a gasp as a duck waddled out, the leaves of the bushes rustling as the duck wandered off.

Letting out a deep sigh, Mike knocked himself upside the head with his flashlight, groaning to himself about how *stupid* he was.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid, stu-"

All of a sudden, Mike's body was hit with a heavy force, pushing him roughly to the forest floor. He let out a groan as his arms slammed

down hard against the ground, his head following right after. Stars danced in his eyes as he tried to see through the dark what had hit him. Or more specifically, *who* .

“Got him! He’s over here!” A deep voice rang out, followed by several pairs of heavy footsteps.

Mike pushed against the arms holding him down, his breathing rough and jagged.

“Shit, fuck, shit, FUCK!” He yelled, tearing his arms away from the attacker and scrambling backwards, hands slamming the ground looking for the flashlight, the taser, a rock, *anything* . Fear was pulsing through every inch of his body, his heart hammering ceaselessly.

The man didn’t let up, running at him once more and slamming Mike against the trunk of a tree, causing all the breath he had in him to fly out of his body.

Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit, shit, shit .

Mike pushed against the attacker with all the strength he had in him, which was not a lot considering his head was dancing and stars were dotting the edges of his vision.

“You fuckin’ punk, you’re in for it now! You little fuckin-”

Mike cut off the man’s bellows with an abrupt, but well-placed, kick to the groin. The man dropped him immediately and Mike pushed off the tree trunk, breaking into a run, going back the way he *thought* he might have come.

His heart was pounding, his mind reeling, his chest aching painfully, but he needed to get back to the van, needed to warn Dustin and get them the *fuck* out. Needed to meet El, Max, Lucas, and *hopefully* Will at the abandoned gas station.

Mike ran with all his might, praying that he was going the right way.

With a huge sigh of relief, Mike broke through a patch of trees and saw the van sitting just in the distance, light glowing from the

window.

He opened his mouth to shout for Dustin, but lost all train of thought as a *huge* blow landed on the side of his head.

Mike fell to the ground with a thud, eyes glazing over and redness forming at the edges of his vision. Pain shot to the spot above his ear, and he lifted a slow hand to feel there, barely registering the wet blood that was beginning to drip down the side of his head.

Two faces appeared in his vision, although it might've been just one. Maybe three. Mike couldn't tell, everything was so blurry all of a sudden.

Voices were dancing around him, and he knew for sure that it was more than one. He couldn't tell what they were saying, but he knew they were the bad guys.

Using up the last bit of energy he had left, his breath leaving his body completely, Mike opened his mouth and screamed at the top of his lungs.

“DUSTIN, GET OUT, RUN, GO, GET OUT, GO NOW!”

Another blow, this time across the other side of his head. More stars. Less noise. Less light.

As the world faded away, darkness swallowing him up, Mike could barely make out the sound of a car engine starting.

Notes for the Chapter:

.....tell me what you think.....

19. Going, Going, Gone

She could only remember one other time she'd felt so scared.

When Will had dropped, when Max had made the elevator crackle to life, El had felt terror like never before in her life.

She remembered the pounding in her ears, the scattered frantic thought pattern, the shaking hands and blurred vision. She remembered the absolute helplessness, the paralyzing shock that she couldn't do *a thing* to save her friend.

The same terror was rushing through her now, but this time it was different. This time, she could do *everything* to save her friend.

Pushing the heavy doors open, El swivelled her eyes up, studying the massive winding staircase and listening for any noises with a determined glare.

Just as Dustin had told them, she could hear what sounded like several pairs of heavy booted footsteps pounding down the stairs, becoming louder as the seconds ticked on.

"Shit," El swore before bounding up the first few steps. She paused as she reached the first platform, glancing back to check on her friends.

Max and Lucas were only a few steps behind, moving slower than normal due to Will's limp form hanging between them. Blood was still spilling from his lips slowly, and El felt her heart rate increase.

"You guys okay? You got him?" She asked shakily, moving quickly up the stairs.

"Got him...keep...going..." Lucas panted, shooting a nervous glance at Max, who still had that shocked frantic look painted all over her face.

El nodded, knowing there would be time to panic and feel the weight of everything, but that was for later. They had to get out fast, get to the van, get to Dustin, get to Mike.

As they darted up, up, up the stairs, burning aches starting to weigh

down their legs, El heard the footsteps growing ever louder.

The guards were coming, she didn't know how they knew where they were, but they were coming—and fast. Too fast.

“El, you...you have to...stop...them...” Max rasped from behind, pulling Will's body tighter against her own as she shot her scared eyes upwards.

Even at a glance, El could see she was struggling. Lucas was holding most of Will's weight seeing as they were both pretty evenly matched in height while Max stood a few inches shorter, but nevertheless, she was panting hard, her face pale with the exception of bright, rosy cheeks.

With a rush of familiarity, El nodded fiercely, taking the steps two at a time, her eyes set and determined.

She knew it was morally wrong, she knew it would ultimately only cause her pain and guilt, but there was no way in *hell* that those bastards were going to hurt any of her friends ever again.

She knew what she had to do.

“Get to the ground floor platform. I'll be there in a minute.” El yelled back, her eyes fixed upwards as she bounded up past the door, throwing a hand behind her and opening it with a thud using only her powers.

El moved fast up the stairs, her heart racing and her mind going numb. It was like she was stuck in one of her nightmares, one of her flashbacks, but *this time* she had control, this time she had a say in how it went down.

The guards ran down the last flight of stairs before they saw her, standing arm raised and steady, her eyes frozen in a glare, her nose beginning to drip.

Letting her fear and her anger take over, El clenched her fingers together slowly, letting her powers act of their own volition. Finally taking revenge.

The guards stopped dead in their tracks as they hit the platform above where she stood, guns dropping with echoing thuds, breaths dropping off as well.

She squeezed and she squeezed, crushing their lungs as if she were crumpling paper. El felt blood flowing steadily out of her ears as well, but she couldn't stop.

The guards were gone, she'd taken care of it, they were dead, but so had been Will.

Her friend had been dead and then he'd been alive and now...now he was beaten and bruised and tortured and hurt and El felt the *rage* flowing through her, bubbling up in her own chest as she crushed theirs, wanting them to feel her pain, to know the hurt they'd caused.

She squeezed and squeezed and squeezed and—

“El!”

It was Max, only a few flights below, hanging over the railing to look up.

El let out a raggedy breath and dropped the guards. Allowing all four of them to drop to the ground, unmoving.

Her head swam and her vision blurred and she shouldn't have pushed it so far, shouldn't have lost control like that.

“El we have to go!”

Lucas this time, his deep voice more frantic than she'd ever heard it before.

Blinking slowly, El gathered her bearings, her gaze avoiding the bodies that lay on the next platform up. Taking a deep breath, she took hold of the railing and started jumping down the stairs, moving back to her friends as quickly as possible.

They stood panting on the ground level platform, leaning up against the door she'd opened.

Max adjusted her grip on Will, who still hadn't moved but had only gotten more pale, his hospital gown dripping blood slowly to the floor.

"You good? You got them?" She asked, eyes wide as she saw the blood pooling on El's lip and under her ears.

El quickly nodded, avoiding Max's eyes.

"Let's go," she said roughly, pushing through the door and peering down the hallway, looking for any more guards. When she saw there was no one in sight, she set off in a run, her heart racing and fear flooding her once more.

Lucas and Max's heavy breaths echoed behind her, and with a twinge of guilt, El realized she was not helping with Will at all.

They kept running, but as they did so, El tried focusing her mind, pulling up a small tendril of power to help hold Will up between the two of them. Despite the fact Will was definitely underfed and malnourished, what with his prominent collar bones and too-thin limbs, he weighed more than she expected.

Must've come with the height, she wondered as they ran. And again, El felt a rush of euphoria as she realized she was able to think these things about Will because he was *alive*.

The four of them quickly followed the path they'd come through, weaving and winding their way up the hallways, looking for the same service door they'd entered in.

Dustin and Mike hadn't spoken or given instruction for a while, and she wanted to stop and dwell on this fact, but El only allowed herself to believe that was because they were on the right track and no one was following them.

"Up there!" Lucas exclaimed as they turned the final corner, the same service door still ajar and waiting for them.

With a rush of relief, El pushed her legs harder, ignoring how they ached and how they begged her to stop. She ripped the door open and looked out, trying to quiet her heavy breathing just in case

anyone was waiting on the other side of the door.

With a sigh, El saw there was nobody there, only the cold, biting air of the dark night. She moved outside and held the door open wide, allowing Max and Lucas to wiggle through with Will still hanging limp between them.

“Dustin, Dustin are you there? Dustin, are we good?” Max whispered roughly as they set off again, down the hill and towards where the gate still stood, open just enough for a body to slip through.

There was no answer, only the crackle of static ringing through their earpieces.

“Shit,” Lucas panted. “Mike! You there?! Dustin?! Anybody?!”

They were at the main gate now, and without stopping their motions, El wordlessly slipped through the gate, turning back and grabbing hold of Will’s side as Lucas passed him off to her, moving to help Max as she slipped through as well.

A new fear was rushing through her now, a crushing fear she didn’t want to let in.

They’re fine. They’re both fine. Dustin’s fine. Mike...Mike is fine.

Her earpiece crackled to life just as Max and Lucas grabbed Will again, just as they ran to the edge of the tree line in the direction of the van.

“MEET AT THE GAS STATION, MEET AT THE GAS STATION!”

Dustin’s panicked yells echoed through their ears, all of them stopping in their tracks and wincing at the booming volume.

El spun around quickly, and even in the pitch black she could see the terrified looks on her friends’ faces.

“Something went wrong,” she uttered dangerously, her voice wavering. Max and Lucas just stared back, frozen on the spot.

No one moved. No one said anything. Their combined heavy

breathing and the chirping of crickets serving as the only sounds bouncing off the trees.

El's eyes widened as her mind sprinted through a hundred different scenarios for what might have happened, each one deafeningly worse than the other. Her stomach dropped and her hands shook and her legs threatened to give out and déjà vu was coursing through her mind and it was just like before and something had happened and it was her fault, her fault, her fault, her fault, her fault.

"Guys! Gas station, focus on that. Focus on the gas station, don't....don't think!" Max yelled in a whisper. Although she sounded confident and encouraging, El could detect how her voice shook just slightly.

Gas station.

With as much effort as she could manage, El held her panic at bay and forced herself to think only of their destination, only of how to get there as fast as possible.

"Gas station," she croaked, swallowing her fear.

And they started running again, in the opposite direction this time, but with the same pounding hearts as well as a heightened sense of paranoia. Adrenaline was rushing through them as they bolted through the trees, thoughts flying and breaths rough and hard. Max seemed to be following an obscure map she'd downloaded in her head, as she was occasionally yelling out directions, telling them to turn this way or that.

They weren't being followed as far as they could tell. Occasionally, a tree branch would break off to their sides and they would freeze, Max and Lucas grunting as Will's weight made it harder to stop, his feet dragging behind him. El forced herself to think about how that was a promising sign, how that meant they were safe, how they were *all* probably safe.

But Dustin hadn't spoken again, and El felt a pang of longing and hurt in her heart as she realized Mike's voice had noticeably been absent.

Gas station. Gas station. Only gas station.

After fifteen minutes of nearly tripping over tree branches, jumping over roots and sticks, dodging bushes and sharp rocks, the four of them made it into a small clearing, the edge of the treeline just ahead and the highway just visible through the breaks in the branches.

El stopped as she saw this, clutching at a stitch in her side and bending over to catch her breath. Max and Lucas stopped beside her, the former leaning up against a tree, carefully trying to avoid losing her grip on Will.

“We’re almost...we’re almost there,” Max panted, Lucas grunting in appreciation. “It’s just down the highway, like a half mile that wa—”

A low groan abruptly rumbled from Will’s lips, and El felt him stirring, the hold she had on him with her powers loosening as he started to wake.

Max let out a choked gasp, pushing off the tree and moving in coordination with Lucas in order to set Will down against the large trunk. El watched wide-eyed as they gently let him lay back against the tree, his bruised and bloody face grimacing in the pale moonlight as his eyes slowly fluttered open.

He blinked blearily into the night, and El couldn’t tell if he was *awake* or merely conscious. Her heart beat wildly nonetheless.

“Will?” She asked softly, squatting down in front of him. “Will? Are you there?”

Her voice seemed to get through to him as his eyes started focusing, looking for the source of the noise. Will groaned again, his face twisting painfully as he lifted a slow hand to hold his side, eyes still rolling around trying to wake up.

El’s eyes glistened as she watched her very-not-dead friend come to. A slow sigh from her right old El that Max was feeling the same thing she was.

The grimly peaceful moment was broken abruptly, however, as Will finally seemed to take in his surroundings.

He took in a sharp breath and jerked back roughly, falling onto his side and scrambling away from the (no doubt ominous) three figures he saw crouched in the dark in front of him.

Will let out a shriek and tried to get to his feet, El's heart snapping in half as she watched him fall to his knees with a painful thud, still trying to get away. He was like a wounded, tortured animal, trying desperately to escape even though he didn't know what was going on.

"Will!" Max yelled, moving towards him quickly, hands outstretched. "Will, it's us! It's us! It's me, it's Max!"

Her words made him stop, but Will had curled up against the side of the tree, his hands up and over his face, as if he was ready to defend himself. He was shaking tremendously, his thin fingers trembling in the night air.

A beat passed in which they absorbed the horrific scene, fully took in the impact of all the years they'd missed, saw with terrified eyes the effect that Intex and the facility had made on their friend.

El's eyes glistened with tears as she slowly, ever so slowly, crawled forward, moving close enough that he could see her, but far enough away that he wouldn't feel threatened.

"Will..." she whispered, "Will...you're safe now. We got you out, y-you're safe. You're safe now..."

El tried to use her best, most soothing voice, the same one that Mike had used with her countless times in the past when he'd comforted her. El tried to channel his protective, calm energy as she slowly moved closer to Will, her palms resting open and facing up on her knees, so that he could see she wasn't holding anything.

"Will...it's me, it's El. W-We found you, you're safe now."

Hesitantly, Will lowered his hands, revealing his panicked eyes staring back at hers, as if she was a mirage, as if she'd go up in smoke any second.

El moved an inch closer, testing the waters, watching his movements

closely. Will flinched as she neared him, but didn't take his wide, confused eyes off of hers, which El took as a good sign. She inched closer again, reaching one of her hands out slowly and placing it gently on his knee. He stared at it for a minute, brow furrowing.

And then El's lips twitched up into the ghost of a smile as she watched his eyes shift. She watched them go from panic to gradual understanding. From disbelief to recognition. From subject twelve to Will Byers.

"...E-El? ...Max?" He croaked, his voice unbelievably hoarse and rough. Max slowly moved to sit beside El, pushing her hair back behind her ears.

"We're here, Will," she gasped, and El could tell she was crying too. "We got you out."

He didn't say anything, simply darting his eyes back and forth, staring at the two of them. Slowly, his mouth curved up, the smile that El had missed for so many years returning onto his beaten face.

"Y-You're alive," Will stammered, and she couldn't hold it in any longer.

Trying to be as gentle as possible, El closed the gap and pulled Will into a hug, wrapping her arms around him and crying gently into his shoulder. A second later, a weight dropped around her, and she knew Max had joined them.

El could feel Will's own arms around her, weak and shaking, but familiar and sturdy and *his*. They sat against the tree, the three of them, for a moment more, relishing the feeling, memorizing each detail, each tear, each stuttered heartbeat.

Then Will groaned painfully, and El and Max let go, reality crashing back in.

"Shit, Will. You're hurt real bad," Max swore before gesturing over to Lucas, who had been standing back and watching the scene quietly. "This is Lucas, Will, he's our friend. H-He's like us. He can hea—"

"Heal people," Will rasped softly, and El's eyes widened. "You...they

were....they were after a boy who could heal people. Must be you.”

The three of them stared at him with furrowed brows, mouths agape. El was just about to ask how he knew about Lucas, when more shrieking filled her ear.

“WHERE ARE YOU GUYS?! SHIT GUYS, OH FUCKING SHIT WHERE ARE YOU?!”

“Fuck! Dustin!” Lucas swore, holding his ear where the communication device was located. “Dustin! We’re out by the highway, go west for like a minute and you’ll see us!!”

El and Max shared a frantic look, both of them feeling the weight of everything crashing back down on them. They turned back to where Will was laying painfully against the tree, staring up at them in confusion.

“Will, we have to go, we’ve got a ride, but we need to go *now* . Can you walk? Stand? Anything?” Max asked insistently, gazing at Will in trepidation.

He simply stared back, his face more bruised than not, purpling eyes wide and exhausted.

It was all the answer they needed.

“Lucas, get his other side!” Max exclaimed. El’s heart ached and she winced as Will flinched as they drew nearer, lifting his arms over their shoulders once more and pulling him up swiftly.

They set off again, breaking through the trees and onto the gravel of the empty highway. Staying close together, they moved swiftly, listening intently for the sound of the van.

El’s heart raced as she heard Will’s pained rasps and struggles, begging Mike and Dustin to hurry up, urging them to come faster.

Finally, headlights danced along the road, and the four of them moved to the side and watched as the familiar blue van pulled to a stop, the back door swinging open, Dustin’s voice shouting for them to get in.

El pulled her powers up and helped Max and Lucas ease Will into the back of the van, laying him gently onto the floor. They scrambled in after, and El slammed the back door shut, her eyes darting around the van as they took off down the road, safe at last.

Will was on his back, arms wrapped up to his chest, staring wide-eyed at the opposite side of the van. El followed his bruised gaze and saw that he was fearfully looking at the array of guns and weapons that were hoisted there, and El felt her stomach drop for what felt like the hundredth time that night.

She gazed back at Will, and watched with tearful eyes as he unconsciously scooted away from the weapons, still staring at them, horrified.

El slowly moved to his side and placed a hand on his arm, catching his attention.

“Hey,” she soothed. “You’re safe, I’ll explain all of that later, but know that they aren’t loaded, and they won’t ever be used.”

Will tore his eyes from the wall and met her gaze, thankfully, but there was still a layer of fear laced in his dilated pupils.

El sighed and lifted her head to nod at Lucas, who was taking off his protective gear, his eyes trained on Max’s back as she argued with Dustin and Mike in the front seats.

El moved to sit by Will’s head, letting Lucas crouch on his knees in front of the beaten boy.

“Lucas is going to heal you some more. Okay, Will?” She ran a slow hand on the side of his head, her fingers brushing against his soft, buzzed scalp. “He’s going to make you feel better. Just relax, okay. You’re safe with us.”

Will just stared up at her, his eyes clouded and tired, as if he was going to pass out again. She took his silence as permission and nodded at Lucas to get started.

As soon as he pressed his hands against Will’s cut forehead, Will’s eyes closed shut, his head lolling to one side.

El opened her mouth to ask, but Lucas beat her to it.

“It’s okay, I put him down. This is going to hurt and he shouldn’t have to deal with that pain on top of everything.”

El smiled grimly, lifting a hand and placing it on Lucas’s shoulder.

“Thank you, Lucas. So much, for everything.”

“Of course, El.” He grinned at her, “Now, go see your boy. I know you want to.”

El’s lips twitched up and her heart skipped. Leaning down to press a quick kiss to Will’s forehead, El got up and pressed a hand against the side of the van, trying to catch her balance as they sped down the road.

She ambled across the van to the front, wanting nothing more than to just see Mike’s face. To see his loving eyes and his gentle smile. To hug him and hold him and kiss him and thank him and love him love him love him love him love him.

As she moved closer to the front, however, Max spun around, her icy blue eyes finding El’s hazel ones instantly. They were frozen in terror, in the same fear from the forest, the same panic from their first escape. El frowned and looked past her, instantly catching sight of Dustin’s bouncy curls jumping out from under his hat as he drove.

But then her eyes darted over to the passenger seat.

To the empty passenger seat.

“....El....” Max whispered, her voice filled with horror.

A beat passed.

“W-Where’s Mike?” El choked, not understanding what her brain was telling her. Max didn’t say anything, instead standing there with her mouth agape as they bumped down the road.

She pushed past Max.

“Where’s Mike?”

She clamored on the back of Dustin’s seat. He was crying.

“WHERE’S MIKE?” She yelled, her eyes darting around the van, looking for his tall, lanky frame. Her frantic eyes landed on Max’s again, who looked like she was on the verge of tears.

“D-DUSTIN?! MAX?! W-WHERE—WHAT—” El begged, her shaking hands moving aimlessly through her hair, across her face, around the van.

And then Dustin said the words she never wanted to hear.

“Mike was taken.”

Ice filled her veins. Her head became weightless and her heart stopped beating entirely. Frozen in her place, El watched with watery eyes as Max came into her field of vision.

Max was talking, Max was saying something. El couldn’t hear a word. She couldn’t hear anything at all. She couldn’t feel anything, couldn’t see anything.

She closed her eyes and took herself to the Void.

It was a van not dissimilar to the one she was in. Well, the one her body was in. Blue, flowers around the logo, moving in the real world, but static in this one.

El took several shaky steps towards the van, her lungs burning as she remembered that she needed to breathe.

She moved with hesitant precision, not daring to do anything more than she needed to, lest the image fall away into smoke.

El breathed in...out...in...and with the exhale, the back door of the van fell away.

She fell to her knees at once.

Mike was there, lying unconscious on his side in the van. He was in

an almost identical position as Will was in the real world. With some major exceptions.

He was bleeding. His forehead was covered in smudges of dark red blood, a small puddle forming by the side of his head. She could see from where she sat that his hair was coated in it as well. Tangling into his hair the same way her hands used to.

A purple welt was forming on his jaw, although she couldn't see it very well because of the duct tape slapped across his lips. The lips she had watched and kissed and loved.

His hands were cuffed behind his back, strapped to the floor of the van, the cold metal cutting into his wrists already.

A horrified sob wrenched out of her, her chest aching, her heart pounding, her mind reeling from the sight.

A second later, El was back in the real world, in her own van, staring at Max as the world faded away, the faint trickle of blood tickling her nose and her ears.

“El!”

Max sat motionless in the passenger seat, running over Dustin's story again and again in her head.

Distracted. He heard a noise. All of a sudden, he yelled to get out and leave.

Glancing back, Max took in El's motionless form, laying side by side with Will's. El had passed out the second she'd re-entered the world, having pushed herself far too hard all night long. Dried blood was pooling around El's face, and Max made a mental note to help clean her up once they got there.

Lucas sat on the side of the van, closely watching Will, making sure he was going to be alright. Max's heart twinged at this, and she felt herself grow even fonder.

She screwed her eyes up as her mind went over the night's events again and again and again.

It had *almost* been perfect. She'd *almost* got everything right. They'd *just about* made it into the clear.

But she had failed again.

Running a tired hand over her eyes, Max turned to Dustin, his eyes trained on the road as they drove, only a half hour away from the facility so far.

Max stared at him for a moment. Trying to see if he was bullshitting her.

"You're sure about this?" Max asked again.

Dustin nodded.

"You trust this guy?"

"With my life."

"He'll help us?"

"Without a doubt."

Max pursed her lips. She didn't *love* this new plan. Not at all. She didn't know him. She didn't trust him. She hadn't thought this plan through yet.

But then again, every plan she *did* think through had gone wrong in some way or another.

She sighed, pulling her knees up to her chest.

"How long 'til we get there?"

"Twenty minutes, maximum." Dustin answered, his eyes steely.

Max ran a nervous hand through her hair.

"What's his name again?" She asked.

“Steve.”

Notes for the Chapter:

I couldn't help myself, I just love my boy.

Let me know what you think! Your comments motivate me to write faster believe it or not!

20. Will's Story

An unending stream of aggressive pounding on his front door woke Steve Harrington up that morning. He groggily lifted his head off his pillow before glancing at the alarm clock.

4:18 a.m.

“What in the name of....who the fuck....” He mumbled as the knocking persisted, getting louder and stronger as the seconds ticked by.

Running a hand through his thick hair, Steve groaned and buried his face into his blanket, hoping that they would just go away so he could sleep. He'd only just finished his shift a few hours ago, the hours of a deputy police officer not as accommodating as he'd have liked.

Pressing his face against his pillow, Steve let out a long groan, the pounding ringing in his ears and reverberating through his tired mind.

“Fucking hell...Fine! Fine!” He sighed, tiredly getting out of his warm bed and throwing a sweatshirt on.

The wood floors were chilly under his socked feet as he slid down the hall, preparing his long stream of vulgar remarks to whoever was knocking on his door at four-fucking-o'clock in the morning.

“Coming, I'm coming!” He groaned, flicking on the hall light before ripping the door open and letting the cold night air in.

Steve fully expected to see one of his idiot friends (probably high, definitely drunk) standing on his porch. On a normal night, he wouldn't have minded, he seemed to be the designated authority figure among his friends, but tonight he was exhausted and didn't know if he had the stamina to deal with their stupidity.

“I swear to god Kev, you have to st—Dustin?”

Steve blanched and stared out at the curly-haired boy, standing with

his arm raised in a fist, ready to knock again. He lowered it slightly, running a hand through his hair.

“Dustin, it’s fucking four in the morning *what* are you doing here?” Steve whisper-shouted into the darkness, squinting in the light of the porch.

Dustin gaped for a beat and shifted on his feet, swaying just enough for Steve to see past him and out at the street. Two figures were piling out of a blue van, each dragging an unconscious body with them. The sight made Steve’s eyebrows shoot up, his now-very-alert-mind waking up immediately.

Steve stared back at Dustin, who hadn’t said anything yet, before putting his hands on his hips, gazing expectantly, waiting for an answer.

A beat passed, the figures moving closer.

“Hey Steve!” Dustin exclaimed finally, slapping a hand on his shoulder. “How you doin? You know I missed you, it’s been too long. Mind if we come in?”

Steve just glared back, watching out of the corner of his eye as the two figures came into the light.

One of them was a girl, long red hair spilling across her face. She was dragging another smaller girl across the grass, her head lolling around with her chin to her chest. Steve caught the faintest glimpse of blood smeared on her face, his heart dropping. Behind the redhead was a tall, dark-skinned guy, whom Steve could swear was Lucas Sinclair. He was pulling along a hospital gown-clad boy, hair buzzed to the scalp, revealing heavy bruises around his face. Steve felt his stomach drop as he saw that like the girl’s face, the gown was drenched in blood as well.

He sighed heavily and looked back to Dustin, who was standing with a grimace of a smile.

“Fucking hell, Henderson, what the shit did you do this time?”

“Woah, woah, woah, I’m not infiltrating anything until you explain exactly what’s going on here!”

“C’mon Steve I told you already—”

“No, no, no, do *not* ‘Steve’ me! You’re the one barging into my house at four in the morning with two bloodied up, half-dead people! There is a van full of weaponry in my driveway! I want some answers now!”

“I know dude it’s just....it’s....hard to explain, and I don’t really think it’s for *me* to explain...”

“Well somebody better start talkin’!”

El blearily blinked and opened her eyes, staring up at what looked like a ceiling fan. Someone was arguing, she didn’t know who or what about but she wanted them to stop. She wanted to sleep and sleep and sleep and sleep and—

El shot up with a gasp, her forehead splitting with white pain as the blood rushed down, vision swimming.

Mike.

Her heart pounded and ached and *hurt* and he was gone, he was taken, it was her fault, she’d never hold him, kiss him, talk to him, see him ever again, and she couldn’t breathe, she couldn’t see, she couldn’t think of anything but his unconscious figure gagged and bound in the back of the van.

El’s breathing was low and her gaze was hazy. Her head throbbed with a familiar ache but the blood under her nose and beneath her ears had been wiped away. Sitting up slowly, she looked around, taking in her surroundings.

A house. She was in a house. A house she didn’t recognize in the slightest.

El glanced around, her eyes wide and stomach lurching. However, her panic waned as she looked up and saw Max standing above her, staring out and glaring with her arms crossed.

“Listen, Steve right? Right well, I really appreciate what you’re doing for us, but—”

“No buts Max! It’s going to work you have to just trust—”

“Trust this guy I’ve never met with not only our most important secrets but also with our friend’s life?! Dustin, you’ve got to be kidding me.”

El blinked wearily, trying to wrap her head around the argument.

Steve?

She looked over and saw Dustin standing with his hands on his head by the door. There was another person behind him, a stranger. Steve, she could only guess. He was older, but not by much, crazy hair sticking up everywhere and a bewildered expression painted on his face.

“M-Max...?” El trailed off, wincing as the sound of her own voice echoed shrilly through her pounding skull.

The redhead spun around immediately, her eyebrows shooting up quickly before kneeling down and pressing a hand behind El’s back, helping her sit up all the way.

“Hey El, how’re you feeling?”

El just stared back, her eyes glistening with tears. Instead of responding, she just shook her head slowly, Mike’s bleeding face still plastered across her mind.

Max grimaced before pulling her in for a hug, her arms the only thing holding El up. Lucas and Will didn’t seem to be in the room, but Dustin and the unknown guy were both standing at the door watching them. But she didn’t really care. She couldn’t really care about anything.

El just sat there in Max’s arms, paralyzed with fear, frozen in absolute terror as her mind forced her to think about all the things that could be happening to Mike *right at that moment* .

Brenner worked fast. He liked results. El knew that all too well. She didn't know how much time had passed since she'd seen him in the van, but she knew it was long enough that *anything* could be happening to Mike.

She had to get back to the Void. She had to check on him and see where he was, see if he was okay, see if he was even alive. But El knew from the aching in her head that she would not be strong enough to go back right away, she needed to rest and recharge before she would be able to find him.

She remained sitting motionless, and after a minute Max pulled back, gazing at El's horrified expression.

"El, you listen to me right now," she took El's face in her hands, forcing them to lock eyes. "We are going to get him back. Do you hear me? We are going to get him back."

Max said it as if it was a statement of fact, not a question, which eased El's mind a bit, but at the same time in the back of her head she was reminded that it had taken them five whole *years* to get Will back.

El blinked and a tear rolled down her cheek. Her breathing was getting more rough and her chest was beginning to heave. El hid how her hands shook by wrapping them up in her sleeves, balling them into fists and pressing her nails into the skin of her palm.

"Max," she muttered. "Y-You know what they do in there. He could be...Mike might be..." El trailed off, not daring to say the words.

"We are going to get him back, El, I promise." There was a ferocity in Max's voice that El had never heard before, a determination in her eyes that made her look unbreakable.

El didn't trust her voice to respond, so she just nodded minutely. Max pulled back and helped her sit up on the couch. Glancing up, she caught eyes with Dustin, who staring at her with a flustered expression. He looked like he wanted to say something, but he remained quiet, standing on the spot and dodging her eyes to look at his shoes.

There was a lull in the conversation, Max, El, and Dustin all caught up in their own thoughts. That lull was quickly broken, however.

“Hey, so, I’m Steve,” the older guy spoke up from behind Dustin. “Steve Harrington. Nice to meet you, welcome to my home and all that,” Steve started pacing, his hands on his hips. “Uhh, so, not that I don’t like company at four in the morning or anything, but I would still like some background on what exactly is going on here. There is a half-dead guy in my bedroom right now, so...y’know I would love some answers.”

El looked over to Max, who was rubbing a hand on her temples.

“Max? Who—”

“This is Steve,” Dustin answered with a sigh, crossing his arms over his chest. “We all grew up in the same town, he’s basically my older brother blah, blah, blah...”

“Aww that’s sweet, shit head,” Steve interjected, placing a hand over his heart. Dustin put a hand up.

“I said *basically* . Anyways, he’s a cop and he can help us get Mike back.”

El jerked at his words, furrowing her brow and sitting up. She opened her mouth, but before she could question further, Lucas’s voice echoed through the house.

“Hey guys! He’s waking up!”

Max jerked her head in the direction of his voice, her eyes wide. Without missing a beat, she moved forward and helped El stand up, putting an arm around her for support. Together they stood up and ambled slowly across the hall. From the corner of her eye, El saw Dustin slap a hand on Steve’s shoulder, mumbling something about food and supplies.

El’s heart ached as they stepped into the doorway of the bedroom before peering in.

Lucas stood by the nightstand, his hand placed over Will’s forehead

and his brow furrowed. Will lay groaning on the bed, eyes shifting under his closed lids in the dim light of the room.

His hospital gown had been removed and a thick blanket was pulled up to his chest. Bruises were still plastered across his skin, but they were much more vague, yellow and splotchy rather than dark blue and everywhere. The gashes on his face were healed completely, Lucas had evidently wiped the blood away from his face, as he looked cleaner, younger, more like the Will she'd known all those years ago.

El let go of Max and wandered closer to his spot on the bed, the redhead following close behind. She pulled a chair up next to the bed, Max following suit. Lucas, still standing by the nightstand, pulled his hand away from Will's forehead. A drop of blood was beginning to flow out from under Lucas's nose, but he swiped it away quickly.

"I healed all of the major, immediate spots. Internal bleeding, bruised ribs, broken arm, plus y'know, all of the basic external stuff." Lucas grimaced as he gazed at Will. "He has some significant long-term damage, though. Besides the inevitable PTSD, he's also got bones that healed improperly over the years, deep tissue scars, and obviously malnourishment."

Lucas paused and glanced up at the girls.

"Will also...he has a bullet lodged under his rib. From what I can tell, it's been there for a while. It has to come out, though, soon, his lungs are rubbing up against it and his rib won't ever heal properly if it stays."

El clenched her fists together, her mouth gaping open.

"A bullet?" She choked.

Lucas nodded with tight lips. El heard Max let out a shaky exhale.

As Will started coming to, Lucas mumbled about helping Dustin and Steve, slowly leaving the room in order to give them some privacy. He squeezed Max on the shoulder as he passed, and El felt a tug on

her heart as she imagined Mike's hands on her. Mike's hands that may never be on her again.

El didn't let herself dwell on it, she couldn't. She would break apart again if she did.

Instead, she focused on Will.

Moving closer to the bed, El reached a hand out, intending to grab onto his. But as she got closer, El stopped short, frowning to herself before retracting her hand. She didn't want to scare him, and she remembered how he'd flinched in the forest, she remembered how she herself had felt about touching for the longest time after escaping.

El decided to just settle her hand against the blankets on the bed, leaving it close enough that Will could choose if he wanted to be touched.

"Will?"

His eyes began blinking open wearily, trying to focus and adjust to the light.

"Hey dude, it's Max. A-And El. Both of us, I guess," Max said quietly, keeping her voice level and soothing.

Will opened his heavy eyes fully, turning his head on the pillow and gazing around.

"W-Where am I?" Will asked, his voice hoarse and scratchy. El was about to answer, but as soon as he finished speaking, Will broke out into a fit of weak coughs, his chest heaving.

El's eyes widened and she glanced around the room frantically, looking for something that could help him. Luckily, there was a cup of water sitting on the bedside table. She didn't pause to wonder if it was sanitary or not, instead rushing over and grabbing it, holding it out for Will to drink. Max had moved as well, helping him sit up against the bed's headboard as El spun around with the cup.

With a trembling hand, Will brought the glass to his lips, downing it

in a matter of seconds. El felt her chest ache for him. She wondered how long he'd been locked in solitary, how long he'd gone without food or water.

"Dustin and Lucas—and Steve I guess—are making some food. It should be ready soon." Max said, reading El's mind.

Will nodded grimly, sitting up fully and leaning his head back.

"W-Who are they?" He asked slowly, pulling the thick blanket tighter around his bruised body.

El and Max shared a look, grinning to themselves slightly.

"Great question," Max joked, leaning back in her chair. "We're still trying to figure that out ourselves actually."

Will just furrowed his brow, glancing between the two of them.

"They're our friends," El assured him. "We met them a few months ago in a coffee shop."

"In A Coffee Shop, actually," Max grinned, and El wondered if she was using humor to hide her pain and discomfort.

"Lucas is like us," El continued. "He helped us get you out. He's been fixing you up for the past few hours." El glanced down and saw that Will was rubbing a hand against his forearm repetitively, almost like a nervous tic.

"He's been healing you. But...I guess you already knew that," she said slowly, recalling what he'd told them in the forest.

Will nodded, avoiding their gaze.

"Will..." El trailed off, trying to muster her courage. "What happened?"

It was *the* question. The one she'd been wondering for years. The one that had been pounding at her mind ceaselessly.

No one spoke. Max and El simply gazed at Will, hoping for an

answer. A long silence stretched between them, expanding and filling with wondering and questions and fears and doubts. El was about to give up, tell him he didn't need to say anything, when his raspy voice broke the silence.

“Can I show you?”

El and Max shared a look before glancing back to Will, nodding earnestly.

In all honesty, El didn't know if she *wanted* to see what had happened, but she'd spent too many sleepless nights wondering, picturing, she just had to know.

They moved forward, sitting on either side of the bed. Clapping onto each of Will's hands, El and Max closed their eyes, waiting for the images to arrive.

It was pure chaos.

A rush of motion, a lurch of panic, Max's hand in his own. Running, running, running down the halls, through the darkness. Guards getting closer, Will trying to distract them.

Then pain, so much pain. Hot, fiery pain stabbing him in the side, in the lung, in the stomach. *Too much, too much, too much.* Screams of his name and blood and blood and blood and then—nothing.

Another lurch of motion, and he is staring up at the blurry ceiling of an operating room, and there are knives cutting him and doctors moving around and a tube in his throat and he wants to *go home* he wants his *mom* he wants Hopper he wants his brother and his friends and then, darkness.

Brenner is glaring at him, but he doesn't care, the words are still ringing in his head.

Eleven and Thirteen have been compromised you are not to worry about them you are safe now they are dead and you are safe and alive with us, now focus.

He rubs the spot on his side where the bullet remains and wishes it

had taken him down too.

Years and years flash by and nothing has changed, but everything has changed, and he is still alone, he is still stuck, he is still dreaming of the world outside.

His head is resting on the cold metal table and his brain is pounding but Brenner has been alerted that a boy with healing abilities has been located and his *friends* are with him. His friends *alive* and in danger and he can help them if he can reach them.

He is alone in his cell and the night shift has begun so it is safe to try out. The pills lay in his pillowcase untouched for days so it is the only chance he will get. Closing his eyes and pushing his mind harder than ever before he tries to find them, tries to tell them, tries to warn them. He sends his message and passes out, hopeful that they heard him. Hopeful that they'll get away and stay safe.

And then it was over.

With a sharp gasp, El's eyes shot open and she was back in the room, tears trickling down her face. The same silence from before stretched throughout the room, but it was *much* heavier this time. Much darker, much more loaded.

"Fuck...Will." Max swore quietly, and El caught a glimpse of her swiping at her own tears.

He didn't say anything, staring down at the blanket rather than meeting their eyes. Will hadn't let go of their hands just yet, and El was glad. She needed to feel anchored to him, needed to physically feel him there with her. And somehow she knew that Will was feeling the same way.

"Those pills...was that why I couldn't find you in the Void? Were they...blocking you somehow?" El asked slowly, furrowing her brow.

Will nodded but didn't say anything.

"W-Well, we got your message, obviously," Max mumbled, pushing a strand of red hair behind her ear. "Scared us both half to death, but we got it just in time."

Still nothing, his eyes only staying on the empty space in front of him.

The guilt was piling on and she couldn't hold the words back anymore.

"W-We didn't know you were alive, Will. We thought you had died that night." El started, her face twisting up as she squeezed his hand lightly. "If we'd known—"

"We'd have come for you right away," Max finished, her voice earnest and strong and true.

A beat passed and slowly, Will nodded, shivering despite the heat of the blanket.

"I-I know that, and trust me, it's *not* your fault. I mean, if *I'd* known you guys were alive—" Will cut himself off, sighing deeply before looking up and finally meeting their eyes.

El smiled, her chin wobbling as more tears threatened to spill over. She glanced over to Max, who was grinning to herself, her cheeks as rosy as ever.

With a great sigh, El collapsed and put her head on Will's shoulder.

"God, we're such fuckin' wrecks," Max grinned, holding Will's hand tighter.

The three of them laughed, and nearly all the pieces seemed to be back together.

The three of them sat together for another half-hour, catching Will up on everything he'd missed during the past five years. There were more smiles and more tears as they chronicled their journey, filling in the gaps, telling the story of how they'd come to rescue him, of the life they'd made for themselves.

Max was careful not to mention Mike by name, and El was glad. They were in a bubble, the three of them, and El was dreading when the

time came for it to pop.

It came sooner than she'd have liked.

The door creaked open just as Max was diving into the story of El's first milkshake. Will flinched back and instinctively moved towards the corner of the bed, as far away from the door as he could get.

Dustin poked his head in the room, his curly hair flopping around, seeing as he left his hat in his car.

"Hey guys, we've got some food for you. Mind if we come in?" He asked.

El and Max nodded approvingly and shifted closer to Will on the bed, trying to make sure he knew they were there to help him, to make him as comfortable as could be.

Dustin opened the door wider and ambled into the room, allowing for both Lucas and Steve to follow after him, trays of food and drinks laying in their arms.

"If I'd have known you guys were coming," Steve said as he put trays of soup and sandwiches and pasta down on the bed. "I would have gotten some *real* food." He pulled spoons and forks out of his back pockets. "But this is all I've got for now." Hot chocolates seemed to materialize from out of nowhere. "So eat up, please, get your strength back. From what I've heard, you guys have had a rough night."

El eyebrows shot up in astonishment and her gaze darted back and forth between the older boy and the mountain of food he'd just provided.

"T-Thanks," El mumbled in amazement, moving forward to grab at a PB&J.

El, Max, and Will all started eating hesitantly, overwhelmed by their options. It looked as if Steve couldn't decide what to make for them, so he'd just made everything.

"I'm Dustin by the way, and that's Lucas, and Steve. It's nice to finally meet you, Will. We've...we've heard a lot about you," The curly-

haired boy said in attempted casualness as he poured a glass of apple juice.

Will looked up but didn't meet his eyes, nibbling on the edge of a waffle nervously. After a moment, however, he grunted quietly, which Dustin seemed to happily take as a response.

A silence pierced the room as they ate, a silence filled with only one thought.

Mike.

Just as El was preparing herself to let the floodgates of worry open, to pop the bubble and let her fear take over, Max spoke up.

“So, you’ve got a plan to get Mike?”

El jerked her head up and was surprised to see that Max was looking to Dustin and Steve. They shared a quick look, one that El couldn't quite read, before glancing back, slow grins itching onto their faces.

“Oh yeah, we’ve got one hell of a plan.”

Notes for the Chapter:

We'll check in with Mike next, see how he's doin'.
Tell me what you think in the comments! I love reading them more than anything in the world!

21. Deception

Mike's body woke up before his mind did.

Aching, pounding, *hurting* .

His head was killing him, sharp pains shooting up the sides, blood drying along the back of his neck. Groaning slowly as he woke up, Mike blinked a few times, trying to get his eyes to adjust. It was only after a few confused minutes that Mike realized there was no light, wherever he was.

And wherever he was *wasn't* good.

Fear flooded his system as Mike remembered everything that had led up to the moment. He jerked and sat bolt upright, his back stiff against the cold metal chair he was apparently seated in.

Mind now on high alert, Mike tried squinting through the darkness to get a grasp of where he was, of what was going on. His heavy breathing and pounding heart were of no help as he realized the lack of light provided no answers.

He had been stupid. Beyond stupid. He was the mayor of fucking Idiotsville.

Strapped to the chair, Mike cursed himself for even stepping foot outside of the van.

Stupid fucking idiot, stupid, stupid, stupid—

He froze.

Fuck. Did they get away? Are they safe? Is El safe?

His mind jumped in panic, tears sprouting in his eyes as he began envisioning her locked up and gone forever, under the mercy of those *people* .

The same people in which *he* was now under the mercy of.

In an attempt to start shouting for help, Mike took in a sharp, frantic breath, realizing quickly that a gag had been shoved in his mouth, blocking not only his ability to scream, but also his ability to breathe in properly.

His chest heaved, and Mike took in as much air as he could manage through his nose, his groans muffled by the fabric in his mouth.

Fuck, shit, fuck, shit, fucking shit.

Mike attempted to reach a hand up to remove the gag, but quickly realized he couldn't move his hands, let alone lift them. Feeling around with his fingers, he found that they were strapped down behind his back with what he could only guess were zip ties.

Kicking his feet out, he found that his ankles were also tied down, his bare feet scraping against the cold, tile floor.

The air stunk of bleach and disinfectant, enough so that it vaguely reminded him of a doctor's office. There was also a faint buzzing echoing through the room, but Mike wasn't sure if that was just his aching skull ringing in his ears. Shivering in the dark of the room, Mike realized that someone had removed his jacket and shirt. Ice ran through his veins as he cringed at the notion.

Paralyzing fear was pulsating through his body, and his mind couldn't seem to pick any one thing to panic about.

Mike was terrified for himself, he had only ever heard the stories of what went on in the facility. He'd never experienced it himself, and he *really* didn't want to.

But that wasn't his main concern. No, whatever happened to him would happen to him.

It was his friends he was worried about.

It was El he was worried about.

If they had been caught, or hurt, or *killed* because he had been a fucking idiot, Mike would never forgive himself.

If his stupid mistake led to El being placed back into captivity, back into the hands of her abusers, back into the torturous life she'd left behind, he would go off the fucking deep end.

Straining against the ties holding him to the chair, Mike tried to get up, tried to move, tried to do *anything* besides sit and imagine the worst. He struggled against the binds, but it was no use. Slumping against the chair, Mike realized with a horrifying thought that there was nothing for him to do but wait. Wait for what, he did not know.

Time passed by very slowly as he sat shivering in the dark room. Mike didn't know how long he'd been out for, but the grumbling in his stomach told him it had been a while. He was also desperate for some water, his throat dry and scratchy as he groaned helplessly.

His head had stopped bleeding, but now the blood was drying uncomfortably against the side of his head and in his hair, sticky against his neck and bare back. Mike knew he needed to put some pressure on the no doubt deep cuts there, but despite how hard he pulled, his wrists remained trapped behind his back.

He was just beginning to wonder if they'd forgotten about him when the lights flickered on.

Mike blinked blearily as his eyes adjusted to the sudden shift in exposure, squinting around the now-lit room.

Coated in white tiles from top to bottom, the room was small, no larger than his bedroom back home. There was a door resting in the corner, iron-clad and no doubt locked. A security camera was posted in the corner of the ceiling, staring out at him threateningly. A large window rested against the wall, but when Mike stared out at it, all he could see was his own reflection.

Mike looked worse than he felt, for sure.

Pale skin stared back out at him, tainted only by red splotches of blood splattered across his chest. His hair was all mussed up, tangled and dirty from the fight outside.

Mike began glaring out at his reflection, grimacing slightly at how

morose he looked, how exhausted his eyes seemed. In truth, he felt much more alive, his heart racing and pulse spiking. Mike figured that may have to do with adrenaline, as the dull throbbing against his scalp persisted, but he pushed those thoughts away.

Mind over matter. Mind over matter. Mind over matter.

He was repeating this mantra in his head when the door opened.

Mike's eyes darted up, his heart beating rapidly as two large armed guards entered the room, one with an embarrassing bald spot, the other with a ridiculously long soul patch. They stared at him as they entered, glares plastered across their threatening features.

Mike pulled against the binds and grunted against the gag, trying to yell, trying to scream, trying to get any answers he could.

The two guards did not say anything, instead moving to stand against either side of the door, crossing their arms and puffing out their chests.

Mike frowned and recoiled out of pure intimidation. Before he could compose a thought about any of it, however, a third man entered. White hair laid perfectly atop his head, heavy (*definitely* warm) coat thrown over his suit jacket, the man looked like the epitome of 'the boss'.

He walked forward slowly, eyeing Mike up and down in the buzzing light of the tiled room. The man seemed pleased with something or other, because he glanced back and gave a quick nod to the two guards. They nodded back silently and the one with the soul patch went out the way he'd come in, pulling the door closed with a slam and the click of a lock.

Mike stared stubbornly up at the man, trying not to show how small he felt sitting shirtless, tied up against the cold, metal chair.

A beat passed, and the man spoke.

"Hello, Michael Wheeler," the man said, tone icy and cold.

Mike tried to keep his face straight, refusing to give in and show how

fucking terrifying it was to hear his name come out of the man's mouth.

"My name is Dr. Martin Brenner," he continued, clasping his hands together behind his back. "You've been causing some trouble around here, I understand. Some trouble with...some friends of mine."

Brenner started pacing slowly in a circle around Mike, eyeing him as if he was dinner. Mike watched him through the reflection in the mirror window, tensing up as he moved in and out.

"I'm going to make myself as clear as possible," Brenner hissed as he circled. "Troublemakers do not fare *well* around here. As you will find out."

Abruptly, the guard at the door rushed forward, winding his fist back before socking it straight into Mike's stomach.

Mike felt all the air in his body rush out in one stuttered breath, stars sparking up his vision. He moaned and bit down hard on the gag, his wrists tugging painfully against the ties as he slumped over. Mike's stomach was throbbing with pain, the guard's punch imprinting in an instantaneous swelling red mark against his abdomen.

The guard moved forward again and Mike flinched away, curling in on himself as much as he could.

Instead of delivering another painful blow, however, the guard simply lifted a hand and ripped the gag out of Mike's mouth.

Blood began forming instantly in the cracks of his chapped lips. Sucking air in greedily, Mike tried to catch his breath. The air was cold and acidic but he breathed in hungrily.

Chest heaving, Mike coughed roughly and tried to gather his bearings, tried to regain some of the bravery that had just been socked right out of him.

He needed water, needed water more than any other time in his life. His throat was like sandpaper as he breathed in the stale air.

"Now," Brenner's voice broke through his thoughts. He'd circled back

so he was standing in front of Mike. “Michael, I want you to know that I derive no pleasure from this. You seem like a fine man. What with your good grades, upcoming internship, wonderful mother and sisters—”

Mike blinked fearfully, freezing under Brenner’s gaze.

How does he know about...?

“—It would really be a shame to waste all of that. To give up such a...happy, normal life. And for what?” Brenner knelt down in front of Mike. “A few girls?”

Fear and anger were battling against Mike’s brain, both trying to take the lead.

Brenner stared at Mike for a prolonged moment, his face set in a determined glare. He was close enough that Mike could see the threat in his gaze, the warning in his eyes.

“So, I’m going to give you a chance here,” Brenner bit. “Much more of a chance than Subjects Eleven and Thirteen are currently getting.”

Mike’s blood ran cold.

“Where did your friends take Subject Twelve?”

Mike’s mouth dropped open, his eyes widening as he took in this information.

Will had clearly been rescued, Lucas and Dustin had seemingly gotten away, but Max and...and El...

“You bastard,” Mike hissed. “What are you doing to them?!” His voice was unrecognizably hoarse.

Anger had taken over. He pulled against his restraints, longing to reach out and attack the man in front of him.

Mike had never been a violent person. His passiveness and easy-going nature came no doubt from his mother, but as his ties cut into the skin of his wrists, Mike wanted nothing more than to sock Brenner’s

smug grin right off his face.

Mike pulled and pulled and pulled until his wrists were surely raw and red, but it was no use. He was still stuck and Brenner was still glaring at him, untouched.

“They are...in containment, shall we say. Thirteen is resistant, of course, but Eleven...” Brenner tsked. “Oh, Subject Eleven crumbled the second we got our hands on her.”

Mike bit hard on his tongue, his breathing becoming rapid with fright as he held himself back. His chest rose and fell heavily and his posture had become rigid.

Mike remembered how she’d looked all those months ago, cuts and gashes lining her arms and face. So sad, so alone, so afraid. He’d been there to help her, he’d been able to fix her up and hold her close and tell her what she needed to hear.

He needed to be there for her now.

“You stay away from her, you sadistic fucking creep,” Mike snarled, staring indignantly up at Brenner.

Brenner only grinned, a wicked smile itching up onto his face.

“Ahh, so it’s Eleven is it?” Mike kept his expression steady. “Interesting. Well, Michael, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but you are not really in any position to be making threats. For your sake, and for hers, I suggest you tell me where the others took Twelve.”

Mike pursed his cracking lips, tightening them as if it would help to keep them physically sealed. He glared at Brenner, sending as clear a message as he could that he would not be telling him anything.

Brenner gazed back, seemingly not surprised as his expression did not change.

Instead, he nodded back at the guard before spinning around, traipsing to the door. The guard moved forward, standing in front of Mike with a sick grin.

Brenner turned as the door was opened from the outside, grinning at Mike's frozen, terrified expression.

"Perhaps my friend here could help you change your mind."

Another blow, this time across the cheek.

Mike's head spun and he felt blood pooling on his tongue. Light danced across his vision as the world faded in and out.

He groaned and breathed out heavily, not daring to look back up at the guard. His hands were clenched together in fists behind his back, the binds digging into the skin of his wrists, the skin of his ankles.

"Lets have fun together Mikey-Boy," the guard grinned, walking around in a circle behind Mike.

It sounded as if he was fiddling with something on his belt, a buzzing echoed through the room and then Mike went completely rigid, his breath catching in his throat as the taser met the skin of his back.

His body had never felt such pain before. Hot flashes of pain stretched across every bit of his skin as though he had fallen onto a hot stove. Mike's entire body clenched from the pain as he shook in the cold metal chair.

The guard pulled the taser away

His dark eyes rolled around under the lids, physically exhausted from the toll his body had just taken. Everything was on fire, every cell was being ripped apart and put back together again.

He panted and groaned, slumping down in the chair as he trembled. Mike could feel the ghost of the burn pulsating across his skin, culminating in a very raw spot on his back.

"Tough one, huh? The girl was like that too. But even she broke. They all break."

And the taser was back, under his rib this time.

Mike's breath came out in forced pants every second. His bare chest

was covered in a sheen of sweat despite the frigid temperature of the room.

He was on fire and he hurt, he hurt, he hurt, he *hurt* .

The immediate pain stopped, leaving Mike exhausted and shaking once more.

Mike sat dazed in the chair, still bound, still trapped in the room, listening to the buzzing of the overhead light.

Burns and bruises littered his aching skin, a reflection of the brutal beating he had taken.

It wasn't the first time he'd been beat up. Middle school had not been kind to him, bullies picking on him ruthlessly until he'd hit a growth spurt. But even then, Mike knew that it wouldn't last forever, he knew there was hope that one day he'd be free of them.

In here though, in here he didn't know what was going to happen.

Hours had passed since the guard left. Mike couldn't guess how long it had been, considering the only window in the room was mirrored on his side. After screaming himself hoarse, a new guard had replaced the gag in his mouth, shoving it in ruthlessly despite how Mike struggled.

The minutes ticked on, and although his eyes were heavy with exhaustion, Mike wouldn't sleep. His entire body was caked in dry sweat and blood. Sitting trapped in the metal chair, his hands bound, Mike's back began to ache more and more with every second.

Though his body felt too broken and bruised to be his own, Mike pushed down the pain, pushed down any fear he had for himself. Straining his ears, Mike listened for any sounds from outside the room, for any sound or sign from El, no matter how pained it may be.

It was all his fault.

She was being tortured and manipulated and hurt again by the same

abusers *because* he'd been an idiot—he just knew it. The girl he loved more than anything had been forced back into her nightmares due to his stupidity.

He had to do something, he had to save her, had to save Max, he had to get them out. But no matter how hard he tried, the ties wouldn't budge.

His energy was draining quickly, and as more time passed, Mike felt his consciousness begin to waver. The lucidity of his thoughts began fluctuating between coherency and fear. He couldn't decide which one was worse.

Mike didn't know when he fell asleep, but he woke up slouched over painfully. It appeared that he had subconsciously moved enough in the chair to avoid laying against the spots where the taser had burned him.

Sitting up slowly, Mike groaned in anguish, feeling foreign in his own body. He sat dazed for a minute, staring at the floor in an attempt to keep from going insane.

He was beginning to think they forgot about him for real this time when the door burst open, slamming hard against the tile wall.

He didn't know what he expected, but it certainly wasn't *her*.

Mike's eyes widened in shock as El stood in the doorway, her mouth agape and eyes set on his.

It was a dream, it *had* to be a dream. His mind was leading him through a fantasy, and he wouldn't let himself be tricked. But staring up at her, with the sharp, shooting pains of his bruises and burns keeping him as awake as ever, Mike knew it was for real.

He let out a broken sob as he gazed at her, his heart dropping and pulse racing.

Her head was shaved to the scalp and she donned a hospital gown. And for some reason, she looked much younger, years younger in fact. Mike didn't focus on this odd fact, however, as his mind was reeling at the sight of her.

El moved forward quickly, not saying a word as she pulled a knife from behind her back.

She gently yanked the gag out of his mouth and he immediately burst into sighs of relief.

“El! El, you’re alright, oh thank god, El, I was so worried! Did they hurt you, are you okay?” He rasped, his throat burning as he spoke, his dark eyes boring into hers, gazing with so much love and so much relief he felt lightheaded.

She stared at him with those big brown eyes for a beat before breaking out into a smile.

“I’m alright, Michael, I’m fine, but you’re hurt! You’re hurt and we need to get out!” She exclaimed, putting a steady hand against his knee.

Mike frowned at the use of his full name, but brushed it off, too ecstatic to see her alive and relatively unharmed and touching him and *real*.

El walked around quickly and took the knife against the zip ties, cutting him loose in an instant. Mike pulled his hands around, wincing as his stiff shoulders adjusted to the new position. Rubbing his wrists, Mike saw there were deep, thin lines sitting prominently against his skin. Red and raw, he winced as the cuts burned against his fingertips.

She cut his ankles loose as well before standing before him, gazing up fearfully.

Mike stood slowly, his legs aching and body exhausted. As soon as he was sure he wouldn’t fall over, Mike rushed forward and wrapped his arms around El, ignoring how she flinched against him.

"Holy shit, El," he sobbed, pressing his face down into her shoulder.

Mike relished the feeling of her against him, memorizing her body pressed to his, pushing away his fear and letting the pure relief take over. Hesitantly, he reached a hand up, running it slowly across her shaved head.

"Oh god, what did they do to you...?" He whispered against her ear. She shuddered but did not respond, her arms hanging loosely at her sides.

"I'm so sorry," he continued, holding her and feeling her and being with her. "It's my fault, I was so stupid. How did you escape? Are you alright?"

After a moment, El pulled back, slowly reaching her hands out to lay against his bare chest. She looked at him and he melted in her eyes, the same as he'd always known them. There was something strange, though. Usually when she looked at him, Mike could always see the compassion and love in her expression. Now she just gazed at him blankly, as if she was looking right through him.

"It doesn't matter what happened to me. We need to get out." She pulled her hands up to cup his bruised jaw. "Michael, I don't remember where they went. Where did our friends go? The one in with car, where did he drive to?" She said softly.

Mike stared at El, slightly distracted by her soft hand on his aching face.

"El I don't...I don't know, he just, he drove off and—"

His heart sunk as the broken pieces started fitting together. Mike frowned and pulled back, his heart racing. She didn't smell right, didn't quite *feel* right. Staring at her blank expression, Mike let go of her completely.

"El, what's his name?"

Mike saw fear flash across her face. Her mouth gaping open before shutting again.

"The one in the car, what's his name?" He asked again, heart hammering.

She started glancing around, looking at her feet and at the wall. Mike took a step back, a frown taking over his features.

"El, what's his name?" His voice was more desperate this time, and

he felt all the hope rushing out of his body. She moved towards him, but he just took a step back.

“I—I don’t remember...I-They’ve been torturing me, I don’t—”

“Where did we meet?”

El stammered on the spot, desperation taking over her features. Mike’s stomach fell, tears glazing over his exhausted eyes as his blood ran cold.

“*Who are you?*”

She froze on the spot, seemingly unsure of what to do, and Mike’s fear had been realized. It wasn’t her, somehow, it wasn’t her. Mike stepped back, pressing his back against the tile wall, horror filling every inch of his mind.

To his absolute repulsion and terror, she began to change, her skin going darker and her eyes changing. It only took a second, but it felt like hours as Mike watched with his girl fade away with his own shocked eyes, replaced by someone else.

The shaved head and hospital gown remained, but a stranger now stood in front of him, smaller than El, but older for sure.

“W-Who the *fuck*—”

Mike wasn’t able to finish his alarmed question, as all of a sudden, out of the corner of his eye, Brenner moved into his line of sight, frowning in the doorway, hands clasped in front of him.

“Subject Eight, leave us,” he commanded. The girl flinched and stared at the ground, but didn’t hesitate to turn around briskly and walk out the door.

Mike stood slack-jawed against the wall, his heart thrumming wildly as he swayed on his feet. Brenner glared at him, his eyes roaming up and down Mike’s broken frame.

A beat passed in which it was just the two of them, glaring at one another. Mike couldn’t believe what he’d seen. One second it was *her*

and the next it was a total stranger. He'd been so hopeful, so alive for a moment, but the dread was setting back in, tearing him down inside. He was royally fucked, and he knew it.

"Was it her hair?" Brenner asked calmly, breaking him out of his horrified thoughts.

Mike frowned, "What?"

"Was it her hair that tipped you off? We only have the picture of her from years ago, I thought it may prove to be a problem." Brenner's voice was confident, assured, as if it had all been a part of his plan. And for all Mike knew, it very well could have been.

Mike didn't say anything, instead crossing his shaking arms over his chest defensively, trying to be brave and hide how afraid he was.

Brenner glared, stepping closer into the room, the two guards from before stepped into the light, following close behind their boss. Mike flinched as they moved towards him, pressing himself closer to the wall.

"Michael, I've been fairly generous and kind so far, but now I'm beginning to feel...frustrated," he enunciated the word. "So, I'm going to ask only once more, and believe me, you don't want me to have to ask again, where are they?"

His tone was icy and direct, but Mike could sense a sort of desperation lurking underneath it all. His mind was still reeling, turning over everything he'd learned and trying to process it all through his exhausted mind.

He was wondering why they hadn't just used the real El when it clicked.

A rush of confidence was flowing through him, so he decided to take the leap. Mike stood up straighter, staring directly into Brenner's cold eyes.

"You don't have any of them, do you?"

It was only for a second, but Mike saw the shift in his eyes, and he

knew for sure.

Mike was only able to grin for a second, revelling in the knowledge that he was the only one at risk, that his friends, that his El were all safe, and that Brenner had no idea where they were.

The guards rushed at him, and in a second he was doubling over, the wind punched right out of him.

He fell to the floor in a heap, chest heaving, trying to get as much air as he could in between kicks.

Everything hurt and it wasn't stopping and stars were dancing in his eyes but they were safe. El was *safe* and would stay safe as long as he kept his mouth shut.

And he was going to keep his mouth shut.

Notes for the Chapter:

Did I fool any of you?

As always, let me know what you think, no matter when you're reading this! If it's been a day, a month, or even a year since posting, let me know!!

-AJ

22. Need To Go

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry this took so long, it's an absolute beast of a chapter.

"I don't know, this all feels very *A New Hope* to me," Lucas said hesitantly, standing with his arms crossed at the back of the van.

"*A New* what?" Max asked, leaning against his side, munching on some pretzels.

Dustin groaned, turning away from where Steve was suiting up to face the redhead.

"*A New Hope* , y'know, the first Star Wars movie," he explained. Max simply raised her eyebrows, looking to Lucas for more explanation.

Lucas sighed, wrapping his arm tighter around her.

"In the movie, Luke and Han—"

"—And Chewie!"

"*And Chewie* ," Lucas went on irritably, glaring at Dustin. "They all disguise themselves to rescue Leia from the Empire, which, I don't know if you remember, *Dustin*, gets them nearly crushed in a trash compactor!"

Dustin groaned and threw his hands up.

"They get out eventually! And you know what, that experience was a total bonding moment for them! The original trio wouldn't be what it is without—"

"Oh my god, shit heads, it *doesn't matter* !" Steve interrupted, fiddling with the straps of his gear.

The four of them broke out into arguments, all shouting over one another. Their levels of irritability had risen dramatically over the

course of the night, seeing as none of them had slept at all really since the cabin, which felt worlds away at that point.

El watched numbly from her spot on the porch, sitting side by side with Will, who had asked to go outside so that he could see the sunrise.

As soon as Will had eaten enough, Lucas had continued fixing the more serious injuries. He could only do so much, considering he needed to save his energy for the mission ahead, so the bullet remained under Will's rib, to be removed when there was enough time.

Meanwhile, Dustin, Max, and Steve had jumped into action mode as soon as the plan had been explained, fumbling around the van and the house, making a few *very* important phone calls, and just generally preparing everything they would need.

It would work. It had to work.

Sitting silently on the porch together, wrapped up in heavy blankets, El and Will listened to the bickering. The pale orange glow of the sun was dancing over the horizon, turning the sky a multitude of beautiful, warm colors.

El was glad the clouds had cleared up, Will deserved as many sunrises as he could get.

"Do you want me to tell them to shut up?" El asked softly, gazing at Will from the corner of her eye. Max and the boys had only gotten louder, despite Steve's interspersed shouts telling them to pipe down.

Will shook his head minutely, gripping tighter to the blanket wrapped around him, not daring to take his eyes off the warm pink and red hues.

"No," he mumbled quietly, "I like it. The arguing. This all feels like a dream, but...y'know, the talking, the noises, i-it makes everything seem more real." El nodded, staring ahead at her friends. She knew exactly what he meant.

When she and Max had escaped all those years ago, it constantly felt

like they were living on borrowed time, like each day was some sort of dream that they were going to wake up from. It had taken her years to grow used to the feeling, and even longer to get rid of it completely.

El knew better than anyone that Will had a long journey ahead of him. One filled with recovery and growth and happiness, despite how difficult El knew it would be. But Will was brave, he always had been, so El had faith that he would be alright.

Will squirmed in his seat on the porch, and El could sense his nervousness and anxiety.

“Hey,” she whispered, reaching over to clasp onto his hand. Will flinched but didn’t recoil, instead relaxing into her touch. “It’ll be fine. It’s *going* to be fine. Everything... *Everyone* is going to be fine.”

She tried to make her words sound comforting, but they were loaded, and they both knew it.

Thinking about Mike was not an option. Looking for him in the Void was not an option. El knew that if she tried, it would go one of two ways.

One, she would find him in whatever state he may be in and she would have another breakdown.

Or two, she wouldn’t be able to find him because they were feeding him those blocking pills and she would have another breakdown.

Neither were particularly inviting, so she chose option three: avoid thinking about it altogether and only *maybe* have another breakdown.

Besides, focusing on Will was easier than thinking about all the ways *she’d* been tortured over the years, easier than thinking of how she knew intrinsically that the same things were probably happening to Mike.

Keeping her mind on her friend and on the sunrise temporarily occupied the gaping hole she felt in her chest when she remembered the feeling of Mike’s hands in her hair, of his gentle touch and soft eyes. Of the very real possibility she’d never experience it again. It

was easier to sit with Will and hold his hand rather than dwell on the aching longing she felt in her heart as she realized she may never be able to hold Mike again.

Yeah, much easier.

Will broke her out of her thoughts as he shivered despite the heat of the blanket, slowly looking over and meeting El's eyes.

He still had a black eye, and there were various shades of bruising around his jaw, but the cuts were gone. Will took a shuddering breath, his panicked eyes glazing over.

"What if he doesn't come?" Will asked, voice raspy.

"He'll come." El responded with as much determination as she could muster.

A beat passed and El could *feel* the nervousness radiating out from him. Will's fingers were twitching and his breathing was rapid and she was about to say something to calm his nerves when he spoke up again, barely above a whisper.

"What if...What if he doesn't want me anymore?" He asked softly.

El's face fell. She scooted closer to him and gently let him to rest his head on her shoulder. The weight of his head drooped against her and she sighed.

"Will," she began, whispering despite the continuing arguments from the van. "There is no way, *no way*, that he doesn't want you. Or your mom. Or your brother."

Will trembled against her and she thought he may be crying.

"You were my first friend, my first *family*. You were kind and considerate and brave when you absolutely didn't need to be. You were everything I knew, and I can speak from first-hand experience when I say losing you was the worst feeling ever."

She gripped his hand tighter.

“But getting you back, Will, getting you back was *everything* .”

A long silence followed as she let the words sink in.

El held Will's head to her shoulder and squeezed his hand, trying to make it as clear as possible that no matter what was about to happen, she was there for him, she wouldn't let him go, she'd be by his side.

Will let out a few shuddering breaths before lifting his head off her shoulder and meeting her gaze. He hadn't been crying, as she suspected, but his face was torn and weary nonetheless.

He was about to say something more when the sound of a truck started roaring through the otherwise quiet morning, the headlights bouncing off the trees.

El winced as Will's hand wrapped around hers, his grip incredibly tight for someone so exhausted and weak. His breath had hitched in his throat and his body had become incredibly rigid.

Neither of them said a word as the lights of the truck turned off and the door swung open. Max and the boys had gone quiet too, ceasing their irritated arguing and instead staring out as a large figure climbed out of the car before slamming the door behind him.

He looked the same as the few times she'd seen him before. Hair greying a bit, lines deeper in his face for sure, but just as gruff as she remembered from the visions Will had shown her back in the facility. He wore a large, dark overcoat, a logo printed on the side, though El couldn't read it from so far away.

Will's grip on her hand was cutting off the circulation in her fingers, but she didn't dare to say anything about it. She just watched with wide eyes as the real life Jim Hopper strode over to the van, an unsurprised glare etched into his features as he took note of Max and Lucas.

“Where's Harrington?” He asked in a low-tone.

“In here, sir!” Steve's voice echoed as he jumped out of the van, the dark guard uniform adorning his tall frame. Max, Lucas, and Dustin all crowded behind him, forming a small half-circle.

Hopper stepped back, sizing him up and down skeptically. El felt like she had to go up and say something, help explain maybe, but Will's tight grip was keeping her anchored to the spot.

"Harrington," Hopper grunted, rubbing a tired hand over his face. "You cannot just call me at six in the morning. Whatever this is, it better be *damn* good. My wife was *not* happy about your little early morning call."

"It is, sir! Good, that is. It is, but um..." Steve trailed off, glancing back to Max inquisitively. She got the cue and stepped forward, crossing her arms over her chest.

From her spot on the porch, El watched as she began sizing Hopper up in the same way he'd just done with Steve. After a moment of doubtful scowling, she spoke.

"Give me your hand," she said, reaching an arm out in front of her expectantly.

Hopper just stared at her, a harsh glare painting his tired face.

"Listen kid, I don't who you are and I don't know what this is, but I just drove all the way down here for an EMERGENCY, so somebody better start—"

"*Give me your hand*," Max repeated, enunciating each word with an equally terrifying glare.

Hopper glanced at Steve, who just shrugged, before looking back at Max. Squinting his eyes skeptically, he hesitantly pulled his hand out of his coat pocket and laid it down against Max's outstretched one, grumbling about how he was going to kill Harrington if this was all just something stupid.

Max gripped his fingers tightly the second he'd put his hand in hers, and even though El couldn't quite see it, she knew Max's eyes were probably slammed shut.

Everyone was distracted, watching the strange stand-off between Hopper and Max, so El took the opportunity to glance over at Will.

He was staring out with wide eyes, his face pale and shaky. El couldn't tell if he was afraid, excited, or simply paralyzed. She wondered if he was going to move, or say anything. She wondered if he *could* say anything.

"No wire," Max said abruptly, dropping Hopper's hand and crossing her arms over her chest. She turned to Dustin, "I still don't know about this. How do I know he's not going to just turn us in?"

Dustin blanched, "Well I don't know! Don't look at me, this part was all Steve's idea!"

Steve threw his hands up defensively, glaring at Max and Dustin. "Hey, I only called because El said you all had some connection with him! I know he can help, but it's not for me to explain!"

As Dustin stuttered and stammered, El could tell that Hopper's irritation levels were clearly rising. He ran a hand through his hair and put both hands on his hips.

"Someone better tell me what the damn hell this is all about! I swear, Harrington, I'm going to write you up for—"

But Hopper's words fell short as he gazed over at the porch, looking over and setting his eyes on El and Will for the first time since he'd arrived.

El's stomach fell and her heart started beating erratically. Glancing over trepidly at Will, she saw that he had paled even more, and wasn't blinking, let alone moving.

She was about to speak up, ask what he wanted to do, see if he didn't want this, when he slowly began to stand up, not taking his eyes off Hopper for a moment.

Will's hand was still very much clutched onto hers, so El rose to her feet as well, allowing him to lean on her for support. Slowly, so slowly, they made their way off the porch and towards the van.

Will was trembling against her, but he didn't speak a word. El watched him closely, trying to make sure he wasn't about to collapse against her.

As they neared the group, El glanced up, her heart aching at the sight of Hopper's shocked expression.

His eyes were wide, his mouth agape. He'd dropped his arms back down to his sides and was staring at Will as if he were a ghost, as if he would disappear if he blinked, as if he was just a mirage or a dream or a hallucination. El couldn't blame him, she knew the feeling.

"... Will ...?" Hopper choked out, his voice cracking as El and Will slowly walked forward. For such a scary, large man, he looked as if he was about to break in half.

They stopped in front of him, El slowly letting go of Will's hand so that he could stand on his own. Will's chest puffed out a bit, and El wondered if he was trying to make himself appear bigger, less hurt than he looked.

"H-Hi Hop," Will responded quietly, his own voice shaking. No one moved as they stared at each other, both stuck in their own states of shock.

Then, in one fast-moving motion, Will let out a broken sob and fell forward, throwing his arms around Hopper as he stepped up. Hopper responded immediately, wrapping his own arms around Will's shoulders, holding him up.

El smiled softly as the pair embraced, moving over to hold Max's hand as Will and Hopper reunited. Will was easily half his size, especially due to how thin he'd gotten, but his growth spurt got him just past Hopper's shoulder. El wondered how tall he'd been when he was taken.

Hopper pulled back, a small, unabashed grin stretching across his astonished features. El didn't know for sure, but it looked like the first real smile Hopper had had in awhile, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

"H-How...? Where? What...?" Hopper trailed off in a low, unsteady

voice, evidently trying to hide how it shook.

Before any of them could answer though, Will started to sway on the spot, his head lolling dangerously. El's heart leapt, and she and Max rushed forward instantly, grasping onto either side of his torso to keep him upright.

Hopper began stuttering out more questions, though it was more a string of words than a coherent sentence. Max and El pulled Will up, gasping as they took on his weight.

"He's still really weak. Let's go inside." El cautioned, looking at but not making eye contact with Hopper.

"Weak? What—" He started, brow furrowing in confusion.

"We'll explain everything, just...c'mon!" Max interrupted, not bothering to wait before heaving Will up towards the house.

Mike opened his good eye blearily, vision fading in and out as his head pounded ruthlessly.

His body was screaming with pain, it didn't like to be moved like this. It didn't like to be moved at all. He felt like one giant, gaping wound, bleeding and aching and *hurting*.

His feet were dragging behind him, the cold tile floor providing some relief to the burns dancing across his skin.

They were moving him again. Taking him to some new room where new horrors awaited.

Mike knew El would be there. Not the real one, of course. The buzzed, hospital gowned, fake El would be there, just like the other times, with the same neutral expression, the same vague disinterest, the same knack for following orders.

She would be there with Brenner. Ready to try and get him to tell.

He wouldn't tell.

“All this time...the last *seven* years...you’ve been trapped in some...some weapons facility?” Hopper asked, his eyes wide.

Will nodded, and a silence took over the room, streams of light pouring in through the windows.

After his near collapse, Max and El had settled Will back into bed, bringing him water and more food while Hopper just watched from the door, still very much stunned. He hadn’t asked any questions until they were ready, though El could practically see the gears turning in his head. Steve, Dustin, and Lucas had stayed outside, allowing the girls some privacy while also continuing to prepare for the mission ahead.

“It wasn’t just some weapons manufacturer, though. It’s a branch off of Intex’s research and science division.” Max continued, her arms crossed defensively over her chest. “And it’s not like they were actually making anything new. *We* were the weapons, Hopper. They used *us* for our...for our abilities. They did whatever it took to capitalize on them.”

Hopper stared at the end of the bed, his brow furrowed as he stood in deep thought. El squirmed in her chair next to the bed, twirling and twitching her fingers around as she glanced between Hopper and the clock on the wall.

How *long* was this all going to take? How much time had passed since Mike had been taken? How much time would it be until they could leave again?

Hopper sat up, “We...We thought that it could’ve been because of your powers, Will. Your mother and I, I mean.”

At the mention of Joyce, Will sat up straighter, his eyes darting forward.

“I-Is she okay? Does she know tha—”

“That you’re alive? That you’re safe? No...No, Harrington called me a few hours ago claiming some emergency. I thought it’d be some

break in or somethin', so I didn't bother to wake her."

Will deflated at this, and El's heart sunk as she remembered the deep, purple bags under Joyce's eyes, the hopeless exhaustion painted on her face when she'd seen her in the town.

Hopper had lifted his gaze off the end of the bed and was now gazing at Will with what El could only describe as unyielding loyalty.

"She never stopped looking for you, kid. We never stopped. It was... shit, kid...it was the worst, just...not knowing." Hopper uttered, pinching the bridge between his eyes. "Dammit, Will, we missed you so much."

El watched with fascination from her spot by the bed. Picking at a thread on her jeans, she wondered what it would be like to have a mother or father. To have a family out there, waiting for you, missing you, looking for you. Hopper seemed like a wonderful father, and from what Will had shown her over the years, she knew her judgement must be right.

"I-I missed you all too. I missed you so much, you have no idea," Will said, swiping at a tear from under his black eye. "I wasn't alone, though. Well, for a while, I wasn't alone. I had El, and then later, I had Max."

Max and El grinned sullenly to themselves, fully aware of the five year gap in which he *had* been alone.

"Can I ask about that? About what happened?" Hopper questioned, gazing between the two girls.

Max and El shared a look, eyebrows raised, and they both knew that there just wasn't enough time. Hopper was there for a reason, and they needed to make sure he would be able to help.

"We can...We can talk about *that* later," El started, looking to Max for help.

"Hopper," Max turned to face him, her eyes set. "We need you to help us. W-We rescued Will only last night from the facility, but..." Max's words trailed off. She took a hesitant glance in El's direction

before continuing on. “But one of our friends was taken. And we need to get him back.”

El swallowed the dread and the fear that was rushing through her. The words out loud were worse than when they bounced around her head. *Taken*. She kept her watery eyes on her scuffed up sneakers, not sure she’d be able to compose herself enough to speak.

“We have a plan—well, Dustin and Steve have a plan—it’s stupid and crazy, but it could work. We need you, though.”

Hopper stared back at Max with the same gruff, neutral expression as when they were outside. But despite the vagueness, he seemed to be taking her words in closely, thinking them over carefully in his head. After a quiet moment, he spoke.

“How did Harrington know to call me? He didn’t know about Will, as far as I knew, so how come he knew to call?” Hopper asked inquisitively, folding his arms over his broad chest.

“We didn’t know it was you, at first.” El said quietly, her voice wavering a bit.

Hopper’s gaze snapped onto hers, and El avoided his eyes, intimidated for some reason.

“Steve said there was a chief of police a few towns over that he trusted. One that would help us. It wasn’t until he mentioned your name that we put it together.” She finished, picking at the thread on her jeans nervously again.

A beat passed as Hopper took it in, rubbing a hand over his beard and gazing at her.

“So you need a chief of police? Why?”

El, Max, and Will all shared the same, haunted look. The look of a person who had been beaten down and persecuted and hurt to the point of breaking. The look of a person who had been manipulated and abused. The look of a person who had been to hell and back but didn’t let it crush them. The look of a person ready to stand up and end the suffering.

“We’re going to take down Intex altogether,” Max answered, her voice low and steady.

Steve and Dustin’s plan worked in three, simultaneously moving parts.

Part One—The Distractors:

The two plan-makers in question had voted themselves to take these positions, volunteering immediately as they claimed it was where they would be most effective.

As Dustin had cleverly pointed out, there was a van sitting in Steve’s driveway. A van that had recently been sent out *from* the facility itself. A van that was completely identical to all the other ones going in and out of the front gates.

El’s eyes had widened as she started putting the pieces together.

“The only thing missing from the van are the guards!” Dustin had excitedly announced. “So, that’s what Steve and I are going to be!”

Using the old riot gear that was stored near the row of guns in the van, Dustin and Steve were going to pose as guards, allowing them to drive everyone right through the gates and towards the back entrance, which is where part two would begin.

Part Two—The Hackers:

At that point of the explanation, Max had huffed and asked if *everything* was going to have a nickname, to which Dustin had ignored her.

Wearing similar protective gear, Max and Lucas were going to go down to the basement to find the audio/visual room, or any room really that had computers with access to the main servers.

In explaining the whole backstory to Steve and brainstorming their master plan, Dustin had realized that all the damning information and data they had on Intex was stored in Max’s brain, which no

doubt would not hold up in court as reliable evidence.

Steve had suggested that they find more dependable, solid information and store it on an actual flash drive, to be turned in or anonymously submitted, “or whatever,” as Dustin had said.

Max had piped up at that point, her usual scowl painting her features.

“What does it matter if we get ‘reliable evidence’?” She’d said. “For fuck’s sake, a detective wouldn’t believe us, let alone an entire courtroom or a judge.”

“I know one that might,” Steve had answered.

And so Hopper became a part of the plan.

Getting a chief of police was helpful. Getting one who already knew about the whole ‘superpowers’ thing was a downright miracle.

As soon as Steve mentioned his name, Will had assured them that he would be able to not only help, but keep them all safe and anonymous, identities protected and secure.

Steve left to give Hopper a call, and Dustin had launched into the final part of the plan.

Part Three—The Extractors:

El volunteered to take this job instantly, and no one had argued with her.

Not only was she easily the most powerful of them all, but it was *Mike* they were going in to save, and there was no way she would sit back and let someone else do the work.

Operating at the same time as Max and Lucas, El—and hopefully Hopper—would go down to the cells where Will claimed Mike was most likely being held.

They’d go in, find him, and get him out as fast as possible, meeting up with the rest of the group and leaving the same way they’d come

in.

It was going to work. It *had* to work.

El had repeated this mantra hundreds of times in her head, trying to gain confidence, assurity, faith that everything would actually be fine. That Mike would actually be fine and not hate her forever for putting him in such a horrendously dangerous position. That it would work out, that they'd all make it out.

But they'd made two plans in the past, and both had failed.

"I'm going with you guys," Will stated, trying to swing his legs off the bed. Sighing, El rushed forward and put a heavy hand against his leg.

"No you're not. You're staying right here where you're safe. You've been through enough with these people, you're staying," El responded in a very maternal voice, gently pulling Will's legs back up onto the bed before throwing the blanket back over them.

"I can't let you go back in there," he protested. "It's dangerous, a-and who knows what Brenner is going to do if he catches you!"

El winced, busying herself by tidying up the last tray of food that Steve had made for Will.

"Who knows what he's already doing to Mike," she said softly, trying not to let the words pierce the room like they were piercing her heart.

Will fell quiet for a moment, and El wondered if she'd been too blunt. Maybe she had, but it had been over twelve hours since he'd been taken, and she was starting to go crazy. A lot could happen in twelve hours. Hell, a lot could happen in twelve minutes. Her heart hammered as she thought about all that could happen, all that was *probably* happening. The minutes were ruthlessly ticking on and on and they *still* hadn't left. Mike was *still* out there, in Brenner's grasp, without a doubt being tortured and hurt.

She started stacking dishes onto the tray and tried to take her mind

off of the worry.

“...Do you love him? Mike?” Will asked quietly, his words filling up the whole room. He said it like a secret, like something confidential or sacred, like something he didn’t dare venture upon. El hands stopped moving, and her heart started racing. She froze in her spot, ears ringing.

Briefly, she was reminded of the moment when Max had asked her the same thing. It was only a few months ago, but it felt years and years away. So much had changed since she stammered through her response, sitting in the dim living room of their apartment.

It seemed like such an odd question coming from Will. So much had changed since she’d met him. So much of her life was different. All of it, really. Will lived in a different part of El’s world entirely. For so long, he’d solely been a part of her *Before* , but now, now he was back and fully living in her *After* , and the juxtaposition between the two were rocking at her brain.

The simple question, just asking if she loved Mike seemed so rudimentary yet so profound coming from Will.

El stood up straighter and slowly turned to look Will in the eye.

“With everything I have.”

Will just gazed back, his brow furrowing a bit as he took in the soft ferocity, the determination in her tone. El dropped her eyes and went back to gathering the bowls and plates, a slight blush creeping up on her cheeks.

She finished and started making her way to the door, face flushing.

“Well I can’t wait to meet him,” Will said softly, making El stop in her tracks. Smiling softly to herself, she turned around, eyes glazing over.

“Me too,” she responded, and suddenly the *Before* and *After* were just... *Now*.

“El!” Max called from the other room, “We’re ready!”

They bumped along the road quietly, no one daring to speak. Dustin and Steve sat in the front, clad in the dark guard uniforms, masks laying haphazardly in the middle.

Max and Lucas were huddled in the back, Max's head on Lucas's shoulder. He was whispering quietly into her ear, but El couldn't hear what he was saying.

El sat across from Hopper, who was fiddling aimlessly with a rifle pulled off the wall. He kept glancing up at her, his eyebrows knitted together inquisitively. She could tell he was trying to figure her out, put the pieces of her life together. She knew he wouldn't be able to.

Instead of looking back at him, El kept her mind focused on the task at hand. She replayed their past operation over and over in her head, trying to remember everything she could, trying to memorize the different pathways and hallways from before.

She was going to be quick and efficient, she was going to be precise and accurate, she wasn't going to let her fear or distress get in the way of rescuing Mike. And she was *going* to rescue him. She was going to find him and bring him back and hold him and never let go.

She had to.

"Okay, we're pulling up, get under the tarp," Steve said quietly.

El looked over his shoulder and saw that they were indeed nearing the iron-clad gates protecting the facility inside.

Moving quickly, the group in the back lay flat against the floor of the van, arms pressed right up next to one another. El squished herself next to Max, her heart thrumming wildly.

She took deep breaths as the gravity of the situation started to really settle in, and horrifically, El realized that for a *second* time she was voluntarily walking into one of her nightmares.

El's alarming thoughts were broken as she felt someone grab her hand. Looking down just before Hopper laid the tarp over them all, El

caught a glimpse of Max's small hand wrapped around her own. El let out a broken sigh and squeezed gently.

The scratchy sleeve of Hopper's big jacket rubbed against El's arm as he laid down on her other side. He pulled the corner of the black tarp over his own head, covering them completely.

The four of them stayed as silent as they could possibly be, not daring to even breathe as Steve pulled the van up to the front office.

"I.D.?" The guard asked, boredom seeping in his tone.

"No I.D., Dr. Brenner is expecting us." Steve answered automatically, following the script they'd written up. El's whole body was rigid, her hand tight in Max's.

"Brenner's expecting you?" The guard sounded skeptical.

"We have an appointment," Steve said casually. "Pertaining to the weapons facility."

There was a pause, and El held her breath, listening closely.

"...Let me check in with Brenner myself, get him on the line."

Shit.

El's heart dropped and her eyes widened underneath the tarp. That wasn't to plan, Brenner couldn't know they were there.

"*El*," Max whispered frantically from next to her, "*Do something*."

Despite her shaking hands and pounding heart, El took a deep breath. She had to do something and quick, before the guard could pull up the number.

Lifting the tarp off her head slightly, El glanced up, the light from the office filtering in through Steve's open window. She could just barely see the guard's face through the cracks.

Steadying her gaze and focusing her mind, El pulled up a trace of her powers, pushing them out of the van and against the guard's head.

She gave it a quick shove. Not too hard, not too far, just enough to push him to the side of the wall, letting his head smash with a sickening *smack!*

The guard fell to the floor with a thud, and El focused again, locating the right button and opening the gate for them to pass through.

Steve pulled forward without a word, driving quickly through the gate and up the hill towards the facility.

El laid back down, closing her eyes as the spot between her eyes pounded ceaselessly.

Not a great start. No nosebleed, though. Not too far yet.

The van bumped along before coming to a slow, screechy halt. El yearned to yank the tarp right off of them, she wanted to rush in right away, go and find Mike and get him out. She had to be smart, though, she had to do it right.

A beat passed in which they all sat in relative silence, save for the stuttered breaths coming from under the tarp.

“...Okay. Max, Lucas, go.” It was Dustin’s voice, low and quiet in the van.

Max gave her hand one last squeeze, and El held her breath as the two of them shuffled out from under the tarp, the back door opening and closing quickly.

Silence filled the van again, and El’s head swam. She felt sick with panic. Sick with the fear she could lose Max or Lucas, or any one of them. Sick with terror as she envisioned walking back into Brenner’s clutches. Sick with dread as she prayed that Mike was still alive.

A few minutes ticked by, but they felt endless. Seconds passing as slow as hours. Then finally, Dustin spoke up again.

“Okay, Hop, El, you’re clear.”

Her chest rose and fell with anxious, quick breaths. Hopper pulled the tarp off the two of them, and they quickly scrambled over to the

back of the van, opening the door and slipping out quickly.

El kept her hands lifted in front of her as they ran from the van to the back door, her powers ready and at the surface should anyone come across their path. Hopper had the rifle lifted to his eye level, his finger ready and on the trigger.

She pulled the door open quickly and slid through, leaving it open enough for Hopper to file in after her. It was the same hallway that she remembered from the last time.

She glanced up and saw the security cameras in the corners of the ceiling, and her heart jumped before she remembered that they were still disabled from Max's previous visit, stuck on a mindless loop using some virus that had warped the system.

El gave Hopper a look and saw that he was gazing down at her expectantly. He evidently didn't know where they were going, so El gave him a slow nod, letting him know she knew where to go.

In the back of her mind, El wondered how Max and Lucas were doing. They had a five minute head start, and the lack of alarms was comforting, but all the power was still on. After she got the rest of the data encrypted on the flash drive, Max was planning on cutting the electricity completely, giving them a safer, more hidden escape.

El ignored the nagging, dreaded feeling weighing down on her heart. She couldn't think about it, she had to stay focused.

Rushing down the hallway, El led Hopper behind her, weaving through the hallways and back down to the familiar staircase. The two of them bolted down the stairs, jumping from platform to platform as they went down.

They brought me two floors down from the isolation cells when they needed me for missions. If they're trying to get answers from him, that's your best bet.

Will's words bounced around El's mind as they went down, passing the third floor and making their way down, down, down to the fifth, where Will claimed Mike would probably be.

They were deep below ground at that point, for sure. El didn't know where in the building Max and Lucas were in, but she guessed they must be further down as well.

Just as El stopped in front of the fifth door, hand up and ready as she began to pull it open, the lights overhead cut out completely, shrouding them in darkness.

El smiled to herself.

Max.

Hopper didn't say anything, but his breathing had gotten rougher. El didn't know if he was nervous, jumpy, or just tired. She couldn't stop to think about it. Not when she was this close.

Yanking the door open, she ran into the hall, looking around wildly for any guards or unfamiliar faces.

No one was in sight as far as she could see, but she pressed herself to the wall nevertheless, not willing to risk anything. Hopper followed her lead, keeping his rifle pointed out just in case. He fumbled around with his belt for a second, and El was about to scold him for being too loud, when he shoved something into her open hand.

Feeling around, she clicked the button of the flashlight, a beam of light shooting out, illuminating the hallway.

"Thanks," she said quietly, waving it around as they walked down the hall.

Turning the corner, El peeked around and jumped back instantly as she spotted two *huge* guards standing in front of a closed door.

"Crap, there's two of them," she whispered, praying they hadn't seen the ray of the flashlight. "What do we do?" She asked frantically, looking up to see Hopper's set glare.

"Stay here," he grunted, grabbing the flashlight out of her hand and puffing up his chest. El watched in confusion as he started walking around the corner, waving the flashlight around aimlessly.

She pressed herself against the wall, listening closely.

“Hey! Hey, you guys know what happened to the power?” Hopper asked loudly, in an almost casual tone.

There was no response at first, and El was sure he’d blown it.

“...Not sure... Who sent you?” A deep voice answered.

“The uhh...the new guy. Franklin. Sent me down to relieve you. That’s where the boy is, right? Yeah, I’m supposed to switch you out.”

El held her breath as she waited for a response, for the confirmation that Mike was there, only a few feet away from her.

No more words came though, instead, the sounds of various grunts and groans sounded out through the dark hallway. El’s eyes widened as she darted around the corner just in time to witness Hopper landing a massive punch on one of the guards, knocking him sideways while the other recovered on the floor.

They were fast, and strong, and big, and El knew Hopper could probably handle them on her own, but she was angry and scared, so she decided to take care of it.

El lifted her hands and squeezed. Squeezed everything she could feel through the strange vibrations echoing out from her powers. Squeezed until there was nothing left in them.

They dropped as soon as she let go, blood draining from their eyes, their ears, their mouths.

El let out a hefty breath, blinking blearily and letting the exhaustion wash over her. Only for a minute though. Her work was not done.

“Shit, kid.” Hopper muttered, his voice echoing in astonished wonder as he stared at her.

She didn’t respond, she couldn’t.

El grabbed the flashlight out of his hand and pushed right past him,

stepping over the bodies of the guards and throwing the door open.

Darkness was flooding this room as well. It was icy cold, at least ten degrees chillier than the air in the hallway. There was also an odd smell bouncing off the walls, filling her senses repulsively. It only took a second for El to place it. Blood.

El jerked the flashlight around the room, her heart pounding right out of her chest as it shook in her hand.

She couldn't find anything, couldn't see anything except wall and floor and tile.

Until she did find something.

"MIKE!" El cried, lurching forward as the flashlight landed on his lifeless form. She fell to her knees, eyes wide and watery as she slid closer to him.

He was laying on his side, shirt gone, bloodied cheek pressed against the tile floor. Mike's arms rested over his head in a clearly uncomfortable stretching position, and it only took a horrifying second for El to realize it was because he was handcuffed to the wall.

Her powers acted without her meaning to. In a flash, the handcuffs were ripped right off his wrists, bursting apart like fireworks. The metal pieces clattered to the floor and Mike's arms dropped instantly. Before they could hit the ground, El caught his wrists, gently pulling them around and back in front of him.

Her heart raced and her head pounded but she squeezed his hands in hers, a sob wrenching itself out of her throat.

"Mike, Mike please wake up. Please wake up, Mike, it's me, it's El, *please* !"

She was begging and crying and squeezing his hands and she didn't know where Hopper was and she didn't care *she didn't care* he needed to wake up, wake up, wake up, wake—

Mike let out a low groan, and El cried out in relief, big, full tears flowing steadily down her cheeks.

“Mike, Mike, it’s me, it’s El,” she smiled as he started blinking his eyes open. She pushed back his dirty, floppy hair, horrified to feel the wet feel of his blood drip onto her fingers.

He gazed up blankly at her for a moment, and El just smiled through her tears, holding his bruised and cut up face in her hands, relieved beyond anything that he was *there* .

“Mike...Mike...I’m so—”

“Get away from me!” He shouted suddenly, voice raspy and tired as he started fighting back against her hold on him. El’s eyes widened and her breath cut right out of her body as he frantically pulled away from her, pressing himself against the wall.

El stammered confusedly and stared in shock as he raised his shaking hands up, thick wounds circling each of his wrists.

“I-I can’t...I can’t do it a-anymore. *Please* , please, get away from me,” Mike begged frantically.

He was shaking everywhere and El couldn’t understand, she didn’t understand. She scooted forward and held her hands out, the tears still running down her cheeks. She wanted to help him and hold him and love him, but she didn’t understand why he was pulling away from her.

“Mike,” her voice broke as he pressed himself further away from her. “Mike, it’s *me* . It’s El, y-you’re safe, we’re going to take you home, please, please.”

He wouldn’t look at her and El was beginning to panic and *why wouldn’t he look at her* .

“Mike, please, I love you so much, *please* ,” El cried, her heart thumping in her ears.

He didn’t move, not at first, just stayed put with his shaking hands up. Then, slowly, he looked up, peering through the eye that wasn’t swollen shut and gazing at her.

“W-What did you say?” He asked slowly, not daring to move an inch.

El swiped away her tears and gazed at him with everything she had.

“I love you so much, Mike, *so much* . Please, we have to go, we have to leave. Max a-and Lucas are waiting for us, we need to...we need to go.”

She sobbed roughly now, her chest heaving uncontrollably. She reached a hand out carefully, hopefully, praying that whatever this horror was, it would *stop*.

Mike stared at her outstretched hand, his breath coming out in rough wheezes as he moved his gaze up to her face.

Slowly, hesitantly, Mike started to move forward, closer to her. He moved as if his whole body was aching, a wince taking over his features each time he leaned on a wrist, or brushed a knee the wrong way.

El didn't move at all, her mouth hanging open and tears wetting her cheeks as he moved into the beam of the flashlight.

Gently, but with shaking fingers, Mike lifted a hand, running it across her cheeks and into her hair. El shivered, her senses coming to life and pushing her to lean into his touch.

She had pulled her hair up into a messy bun earlier in the day, and now loose strands hung lifelessly around her face.

His trembling fingers tangled into the locks, feeling and stroking softly.

El watched with confusion as a realization settled over his broken features. His good eye lighting up falteringly, almost like he didn't trust what he was seeing.

“...El...?”

Mike's voice was filled with more fear and trepidation than she'd ever heard from him, and it took all she had not to fall in his arms completely.

El lifted her own hand and placed it gently on his, squeezing his

fingers lightly.

“It’s me, Mike,” she nodded.

Mike let out a sob of his own, his face twisting up in what El could only describe as pure relief. Moving in a simultaneous wave of motion, Mike collapsed into El just as she gave in and pulled him against her.

She wrapped her arms around his bare shoulders and pulled his head to the crook of her neck, holding him and hugging him against her, letting the tears flow freely. Mike’s own weak arms had wrapped themselves around her torso, and even though she couldn’t see it, El knew he was crying as well.

El was shaking and scared and afraid but Mike was *alive* , he was *okay* , he was with her.

She was happy to stay there forever, to feel him and hold him for as long as time would allow.

But she knew time would not allow her very much at all.

“Mike, we need to go.”

Notes for the Chapter:

It's all working out so far...hope that continues...

-AJ

23. Retribution

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm so sorry this took me so long to finish, college is...hard. Anyways, this is a nice long one, enjoy!

“It’s this one,” Max hissed, fiddling with the door handle before sliding her hand against the digital lock.

Despite how her heart raced, Max pressed a strong palm against the side of the lock, focusing her mind and sending her energy out. The password-protected lock beeped erratically for a moment, the numbers lighting up sporadically before going dim, and with a faint *click*, the door slowly swung open. Lucas looked around nervously, stun gun held out in front of him in case any *more* guards decided they wanted to come around.

Max and Lucas’s trip down to the basement floor—where the computer center was located—had started out okay. They’d woven through hallways and down stairwells in relative silence, moving swiftly and stealthily just in case anyone could hear them.

By the time they’d reached the fifth floor down, however, they’d run into two doctors and a guard. Lucas had acted quickly, stunning them before they could shout or alert anyone else. It had been fast, but it left them both a bit unsettled. They wanted to be in and out quickly, without any carnage or confrontation.

With jumping nerves, Max had reminded herself that it had worked last time, last time they were in and out quickly, without any interference. But as the nagging voice in her head told her that *that* was only because they had Dustin warning them about anything that may have gone awry.

When Max had disabled the cameras the day before, she had inserted a virus that would leave them stuck on the same looped footage for hours on end. The only way to end the loop and return to regular use was to either take out the virus completely or replace the entire system. It had only been a day, and as far as Max could tell the

cameras were still unoperational.

She didn't know if they knew how to fix them, or if they had even figured out they were broken, but she didn't care. The security cameras being out worked both in their favor and against it, for while no one could see them coming, now *they* couldn't have eyes on the inside, Dustin couldn't be an omnipresent voice telling them which way to go or who might be approaching.

They were *really* gambling a lot, but it would be worth it.

It had to be worth it.

Glancing around the room nervously, Max poked her head through the doorway, looking for any signs of life. The room was dim, with only a few hazy overhead lights flickering in the corners. The stuffy air stunk of mold, filling Max's senses and overwhelming her with the sudden memory of crawling around in her foster dad's attic.

There didn't seem to be anyone inside, so Max shuffled inside the musky room, Lucas following close behind. She tapped her finger nervously against the small flash drive settled inside her pocket, checking once more to make sure it was still there.

Hopper had given Max very clear instructions, telling her exactly what information he would need in order to indict Intex as a whole, what he would need to take down Brenner and send everyone involved to serve their due justice. It was a lot to remember, and Max was nervous she would forget certain details, but Lucas had assured her that he would be there to remind her.

She only needed a few minutes, she could be in and out in a instant so long that she was left alone.

A row of printers, copy machines, and enormous, old desktop computers sat clumped together along the lining of the walls in the small room, all shut down and dim. Max rushed forward, pulling the flash drive from her pocket as she pulled out a chair.

"Okay, let's see how fast I can do this," Max whispered, slamming her palm against the side of the computer, stirring it to life with a bolt of

electric light.

“Want me to time you?” Lucas joked, leaning on the desk but keeping his eyes trained on the door. Max shot him a sarcastic look before looking back at the computer, beginning to type away.

“Ha-Ha...” she paused. “Maybe.”

Lucas smirked back at her, gripping his weapon just a bit tighter.

Never in a million years did Lucas think he would be in this position. Never in his *lifetime* did he expect to feel the cold, heavy weight of a *gun* , guarding the door while his girl worked on taking down a multinational corporation, keeping his eyes out and praying that his friends would make it in time to save Mike’s life.

If there was enough time, Lucas may have paused and let the moment sink in, let it expand and retract and weigh deeply on his heart. But, there wasn't any time. Not yet, at least.

“Okay, lights out in three...two...” Max mumbled. As soon as she finished counting down, the flickering overhead lights shut down, shrouding them in complete darkness. Outside the room, Lucas could hear a few seemingly confused, muffled voices, followed by a series of footsteps.

“Powers out everywhere?” He asked, walking over to the door to carefully peek his head out. There wasn’t anyone that he could see, and the voices were rising. He could only guess that people were rushing upstairs to the main rooms to figure out what went wrong.

“It’s out. Should be for the next half hour at least,” Max responded, still typing away and glaring at the pale blue glow of the computer screen. Lucas nodded slowly before ambling back over to the desk where she sat, fidgeting with his gun nervously.

“How come your computer still works?” He asked, brow furrowing. “Y’know, if the power generator is cut out?”

Max snorted to herself, a slow smile itching up on her face. Pausing for a brief second, she gave him a sly grin, raising one eyebrow.

“I’m my own power generator, dumbass.”

It was just the thing to break the tension in the room. Smiling slowly, Lucas let out a small laugh, more to himself than to her.

“God you’re incredible,” he whispered, watching her out of the corner of his eye. His heart raced as Max’s distracted smile widened slightly. She kept her eyes glued on the screen, but Lucas could see that some of the tightness in her shoulders had relaxed.

Max continued to work for a few moments more, typing frantically and swearing every so often. Lucas kept his eyes locked on the door, trying to keep the lightness of their joking in his mind rather than the panicked, twisted images of Mike’s hopefully-not-dead-but-definitely-injured body.

“Sir, I don’t know what—”

“You know *exactly* what. How could you not have anticipated this?”

“We didn’t think—”

“W-With the mileage and Subject Twelve in the state he was—”

“We thought there would be more—”

“More time to prepare!”

Voices were beginning to echo from down the hall, moving closer to the door as the seconds passed. Lucas’s eyes widened and he looked over to a very frozen Max, whose neck was strained and lips tight.

She knew that voice.

Brenner.

“Max, we have to—”

“I-I know, I’m done. I’m done.”

Yanking the flash drive out of the computer, Max closed her eyes and pushed a palm up against the screen. It shut down in an instant and

the glow of the screen cut out, leaving them in complete darkness.

Lucas grabbed hold of Max's elbow, tugging it lightly in the direction of the wall adjacent to the door. Shoving the flash drive in her pocket, Max closed her trembling fingers around Lucas's hand on her arm, holding on tight.

They pressed themselves against the wall, not daring to even breathe as the voices drew closer.

"W-What do you want us to do, sir?" A nervous voice said. A pause passed in which only the echoing footsteps sounded off. Lucas moved his hand from Max's elbow and entwined their fingers together.

"What do I want? What do I *want*?" Brenner snarled. "What I want is for you *imbeciles* to use an ounce of common sense, for once. What do you *think* you should be doing? Where do you *think* they are?"

The footsteps stopped right outside the door and Max thought she might have passed out right there and then had it not been for Lucas's strong grip anchoring her to the spot.

"I-I don't...In th-the..."

"*The boy*, you morons." Brenner hissed. "They're here for the *boy*."

Max's wide eyes darted up and met Lucas's. Even in the dark of the room she could see the panic written across his face, the same panic that was no doubt mirrored on her own. The footsteps started up again, walking past their door easily and moving to the staircase just a few meters away.

"I think it's time that I have a little...a little *chat* with my dear subjects..."

The voices faded away.

Max and Lucas stood motionless, holding hands like it was the only thing keeping them standing. Minds whirling, hearts racing, they turned to each other.

"Mike..." Lucas whispered.

“El...” Max choked out.

He didn't quite register anything at first, his mind letting him float easily from dreamless sleep to hazy awakeness. It was quiet, blissful, nothing in the world was wrong.

Then, the aches started throbbing through his body once more, and the rips in his skin stung with renewed fervor, reminding him that he was *hurt* , reminding him that it was only the beginning.

Mike's arms were stretching painfully over his head, pulling at his shoulder blades and tugging at his upper arms. His wrists burned where the handcuffs were cutting in, and vaguely Mike wondered that if he pulled hard enough they might cut right through his wrists completely.

No more...No more...

Mike's mind was just beginning to stir when all of a sudden, his arms were falling, floating down, clasped gently by an anonymous set of hands. His shoulders burned, and the blood rushing down his arms made his wrists sting painfully, but the hands were so *gentle* , so kind, so unlike the brutal treatment he'd seen up until that point.

A voice was talking, yelling, shouting, but Mike couldn't quite hear it. Everything was bubbly and twirly and underwater and his ears weren't working right, but even in his dazed and anguished state, he could make out the sound of *her* voice.

Groaning softly, Mike let the beam of filtered light in through his eyelids, his exhausted body forcing his eyes open. Everything was blurry, and even though the blood was *pounding* through his ears, Mike started to hear her words, started to let them in.

“—wake up, it's me, it's El, *please* !”

It was only then that he began to register a soft hand running through his bloody, matted hair. Letting himself enjoy this dream—because it could clearly only be a dream—Mike breathed out softly, his eyes beginning to clear up.

Gazing up blearily, Mike saw that El's hand was softly caressing his forehead. The soft glow of some source of light (a flashlight, maybe?) danced across the soft edge of her cheeks, highlighting the curve of her cheekbones. Her big brown eyes were warm and inviting and she was talking to him, smiling through tears and—

Mike went rigid and his mind jerked to a stop. This dream...this dream was *too* real. He could really feel her there, but as the past hours had shown, *this* was not his El. No, this *image* , this *trick* was only meant as a means to get him to spill on where the real El had gone.

His body stirred to life as the realization set in, horror and disgust filling his mind. Mike cursed himself, how could he have caved and enjoyed the feel of this *imposter* .

“Get away from me!” He shouted, voice raspy and tired as he started fighting back against her hold on him, pushing out of her arms and crawling away to press himself against the cold tile wall.

The fake El was stammering and moving towards him, so Mike raised his hands up, cursing at himself for how they shook.

It was too much, he couldn't keep going like this. Waking up and seeing her and believing for a split second that she was really there, that it really would be okay. It was torture beyond any of the burns and bruises and gashes he'd received since being taken.

“I-I can't...I can't do it a-anymore. *Please* , please, get away from me,” Mike begged frantically, praying to anyone that was listening for some sort of relief, some sort of freedom from this pain.

The imitation of El scooted closer, prompting him to only move further away, caving in on himself against the wall.

“Mike,” He wanted to cry, they'd figured out that the real El didn't call him Michael. “Mike, it's *me* . It's El, y-you're safe, we're going to take you home, please, please.”

God, her voice sounded so *right* . Much less robotic than all the other times. It sounded like she really cared, like she was telling the truth,

but Mike knew she wasn't. This was a trick. Just like the others.

Mike kept his eyes slammed shut, praying that she would *go away* and leave him to his misery, leave him to worry about the *real* El, if she was safe, if she was okay.

The girl moved even closer, and Mike was about to break down completely when she spoke again.

"Mike, please, I love you so much, *please* ."

He froze, not daring to move an inch.

This was new, they hadn't made the fake El say that anytime before. His heart thudded against his chest as the words sank in, and for some odd reason, Mike let them.

He let her words move through his head and settle against his heart because they sounded *so right* . Just like all the times in the past when the *real* El had whispered it against his ear, or laughed it through a smile, or cried it against his chest. They sounded so authentic that for a split second, Mike let himself wonder if maybe...maybe this *was* the real deal.

Slowly, he lowered his shaking hands, opening the eye that hadn't swollen shut and peering at her skeptically.

"W-What did you say?" Mike asked slowly, remaining frozen against the tile wall. His brow furrowed as he watched El swipe away her tears and gaze at him with a look so familiar it made his heart physically ache.

"I love you so much, Mike, *so much* . Please, we have to go, we have to leave. Max a-and Lucas are waiting for us, we need to...we need to go."

Her words were hurried, rushed, like she actually *was* in a hurry, like she was *actually* running out of time.

Mike's already rough breathing caught in his throat as she mentioned Max and Lucas by name, his pulse rising and heart racing with a hope he wouldn't *dare* allow himself to indulge. They didn't know about

Max and Lucas. Not their names, at least. That was what had tripped up the fake El the first time.

She was crying harder now, her chest heaving, and Mike was surprised that even in his weakened state, he had to hold himself back from pulling her into his arms.

He wanted to, he *had* to, but he still wasn't positive.

Mike had been staring at her out of his good eye for so long now, he barely registered that she had outstretched her hand to him, the long, slim fingers trembling in the glow of the flashlight.

He stared at it for a beat, breaths coming out in rough wheezes before he moved his gaze back up to her face.

He hadn't noticed it at first, the shock and lag on his tired mind letting it slip past his threshold of awareness as he had regained consciousness.

Hair, this El had hair.

His stomach dropped.

Slowly, with tender hesitance, Mike pushed off the wall, scooting closer to her. He winced as he leaned against his wrists but shrugged off the pain, his heart beating much too hard for him to notice much else.

She didn't move at all, instead keeping her eyes locked on his, mouth agape as he drew closer.

Gently, with shaking fingers, Mike lifted a hand, slowly running it across her cheeks and into her hair. It felt so *real*, so much like the memories he had of her. She shivered and leaned into his touch, and Mike was nearly sure but he wouldn't let himself feel it.

The color was the same as he remembered, dark chestnut locks pulled out from the loose bun, framing her delicate face. Mike let his fingers dance and tangle into the loose strands, stroking and feeling them softly.

Could it be...

His touch dropped down to cup her cheek, and even though he knew he might regret it, Mike let himself fall victim to his hope, let himself cave and believe what he was seeing.

“...*El*...?”

She lifted her own hands and gently placed them over his, squeezing his fingers. She looked into his eyes and then he could see it, he could *see* the love and devotion and compassion that had been missing from all the false *El*'s.

“It’s me, Mike,” she nodded, and all of a sudden, it was *El* .

He let out a sob as the relief flooded through his system, flooring him and washing over him completely. Finally allowing himself to see the truth, Mike collapsed against *El* in a fluid wave of motion. She pulled him against her easily, and Mike’s heart burned as he slid into her embrace, revelling in the reassurance of her small but strong arm wrapped around his bare shoulders.

Tears sped down his cheeks as she held his head to the crook of her neck, running her hands through his hair and cradling him against her. Despite the fact that Mike was much too tall to be held completely, *El* was seemingly using her entire body to hold him and shield him, letting him collapse against her as the weight of *everything* finally pulled him down.

It was her, it was really her. Real and alive and *there* and how—how was she there?

Before he could ask, she was whispering fervently in his ear.

“Mike, we need to go.”

His heart stuttered and the world was threatening to crash back in, but he just wanted to stay there, wrapped up with *El* for the rest of time, feeling the warm weight of her against him and the calm feel of her hand in his hair.

El sighed deeply against him and he felt the rise and fall of her chest

and he wanted her forever. But forever would have to start once they were somewhere safe.

El pulled back slightly, dropping her hand from his hair and cupping his cheek once more, stroking softly.

“We have to go now, they’ll be waiting,” she said urgently, her eyes burning with more tears.

Mike let another second pass, the last one before they would have to move, before they would have to get up and go. He breathed in gently, letting it soak in.

“Okay,” he answered, smiling slowly through his split lip.

El’s heart ached as the small wince took over his smile, he was clearly in a tremendous amount of pain. There wasn’t a whole lot she could do about it though, not until they were far away and safe or until they had Lucas again.

Dropping her hand from where it cupped Mike’s cheek, El wrapped her arms around his bare torso in attempt to pull him up slowly, trying to get him in a more upright sitting position. But Mike groaned and flinched the instant her hands wound their way around his chest and El knew she couldn’t do it alone.

“Hopper!” She yelled in the direction of the door, where she guessed he’d been standing guard. A grunt sounded from outside, confirming her theory before his gruff, huge figure moved into the light of the doorway.

“Who—What—?” Mike questioned, swivelling his head around to glance at El curiously. She wanted to answer him, but there just wasn’t enough time, they needed to get out.

“Hopper, I need you to help me get him up!” El exclaimed, motioning to where Mike lay slack against her.

Hopper nodded and rushed forward quickly, taking his huge, thick jacket off as he moved to kneel beside them. El’s brow furrowed in confusion as he took it off, but didn’t question it. Pushing Mike up slowly, El’s curiosity was answered as Hopper draped the jacket over

Mike's bare shoulders, which El only realized at that moment were shivering tremendously.

Hopper hooked an arm around Mike's back and slowly hauled him to his feet, steadying him and holding him up straight despite how Mike slumped painfully.

Scrambling to her feet, El snatched up the flashlight before moving in front of where the two stood. Ignoring Hopper's presence, El went up on her toes and cupped the side of Mike's cheek, closing the distance between them and pressing her lips against his in a soft, quick kiss.

El didn't like the feel of his busted lip as it only painfully reminded her of their dire situation, but she couldn't go any further without kissing him at least once. After all, she'd spent the last day not knowing if she'd *ever* be able to do it again, so she decided she wasn't going to waste an opportunity.

Pulling away and beaming at him for a quick beat, El felt a newfound rush flowing through her, be it adrenaline or just pure love, she found new energy, new bravery to move forward.

"Let's go," she whispered, spinning around to lead the way.

Moving quickly out of the cell, El let the flashlight dart around the floors and the walls, looking for any signs of life as they hurried back to the stairwell. Hopper and Mike were following behind, albeit slower due to Mike's slack weight.

El wanted to stop and make sure he was okay, but innately she knew that they couldn't stop. Plus, she trusted that Hopper was going to take care of him. She didn't know why—after all she'd only met the man a few hours before—but she trusted him. Trusted him with the person who mattered most to her.

Slamming the stairwell door open with her mind, El rushed to the platform, eyes darting around for any sights or sounds. Hopper and Mike followed quickly behind her, and it didn't escape El how ragged Mike's breaths had become.

"You okay?" She asked quickly, gazing at the two of them. Hopper

nodded, but his eyes bore into hers and she could see the message he was sending her. *Hurry, he's fading fast.*

El's mind reeled and her heart jumped to her throat but she couldn't let it get to her, she couldn't get upset, she had to be strong. Strong and ready for anything that might be coming.

El turned around and started up the stairs, her eyes wide and determined, one hand with the flashlight leading the way, the other up just in case she would need to use her powers.

The three of them weaved their way up slowly, breathing haggard as the exhaustion hit them hard. The stairs seemed never ending, each step and each second ticking by painfully slow.

They moved up the floors one at a time, getting closer to the ground where Dustin and Steve (and hopefully Lucas and Max) would be waiting with the van.

But as they neared the final incline, it became clear that this would not be an easy escape.

"Hello, Eleven."

Max panted hard, rushing up the stairs with Lucas in tow. Their hands were clasped tightly together, not daring to let go as they ran and ran and ran.

The flash drive was secure in her pocket, containing all the damning evidence they would need to take the entire facility down in one legal swoop, and even though Max would periodically check that it was still there, she felt it burn against her skin, like a small, compartmentalized symbol of sin and abuse.

She wanted revenge, she wanted this take down, she wanted to watch this place burn to the fucking ground, but more than anything, she wanted to make sure her friends were all okay.

"Almost...there...three more...floors..." Max panted as Lucas tugged her up, his longer legs giving him the advantage over her.

“Almost—shit, Max!” Lucas swore, abruptly pulling her back down. The unexpected shift in motion left her whiplashed, her feet slipping slightly as Lucas pulled her back against the wall.

“Fuck, what?!” she hissed, glaring at him whilst panting heavily.

Without saying anything, Lucas raised a finger up, silently pointing to the few platforms above them. Peering up slightly, Max’s eyes widened as she took in the scene, squinting through the dim illumination of emergency backup lights and a few flashlights bouncing off the walls.

Brenner was standing there, right in front of the door they needed to get through in order to get back outside. Four armed guards flanked either side of him, guns cocked and ready to fire at something ahead of them. Brenner was glaring, eyes malevolent and full of evil, arms crossed over his chest. Despite the sneer painted on his face, however, Max caught sight of just the hint of a smile.

Frowning, she looked closer, trying to see what he was looking at.

She wished she hadn’t.

Max saw Hopper first, his tall, wide frame standing tall on the staircase below Brenner. Hopper seemed to be holding something, or rather someone, and Max’s breath caught in her throat as she realized it was *Mike* he was holding.

Even from where she stood she could tell he was in bad shape. Half-standing, half-leaning against Hopper, Mike looked ready to collapse. *Shit...*

Though the shock of seeing Hopper and Mike was bad, Max didn’t think she would ever be ready to see what stood before them.

El stood on the top step just before Brenner, arm outstretched, hand shaking heavily.

“ *Shit!* ” Max swore, moving back to press herself next to Lucas against the wall.

Brenner had caught them, El was in trouble, and once again, Max felt

the guilt of another failed plan weigh down on her shoulders.

Fuck, shit, fuck, shit, fuck, SHIT.

Grasping her head in her hands, Max closed her eyes to let the panic wash over her, readying herself for the wave of shame to hit her.

“Hey!” Lucas hissed, moving to stand in front of her, pulling her hands down and clasping his own on her cheeks. “This is no time to give up! We’ve come so far, let’s finish this!”

Max gazed into his dark eyes, feeling smaller than ever before in her life.

“How?” She whispered.

Lucas just stared for a moment, brushing his thumbs against her temples. After a moment, he spoke.

“We...We have to go up, get ahead of them!” He paused, thinking hard. “Do the elevators still work if you cut the power?”

Max’s eyes widened and suddenly a plan was forming in her head.

Not wasting any time, Max moved forward and captured Lucas’s lips with her own, giving him a quick, hard kiss because *god* he was a genius sometimes.

“Doesn’t matter,” she answered as she pulled away, “*I’m* the power.”

El stood in shock on the top step, frozen as she stared up at the man who haunted her nightmares, whose voice she still heard in the back of her head, who had spent the majority of her life tormenting and using her.

He looked the same, five years hadn’t made a lick of change for him. He still had the same slicked back white hair, the same tie and huge overcoat, the same glare and piercing gaze. It was all the same, and El felt like she’d stepped back in time.

But as Mike groaned weakly behind her, El knew that this wouldn't be like all the other times. For while Brenner hadn't changed at all, *she had*.

"Eleven, I see you've found Michael. Pity, we were having so much *fun* together." Brenner taunted, twisting and untwisting his hands in front of him.

Rage was swirling in the pits of her stomach, and El had to hold herself back from lashing out. She couldn't, not yet. The guards standing on either side of Brenner were intimidating for sure, but what was worse was that their guns were not trained on her, they were trained on Mike and Hopper.

"You've grown so much in the past few years," Brenner crooned, "My goodness, it's no wonder Michael didn't fall for our little trick at first."

Little trick?

El thought back to how terrified he'd been when he'd seen her at first, she recalled the words he'd spoken, *I can't do it anymore. Please, get away from me*. She had no idea what that meant, and she didn't really want to find out. Not yet, at least.

"Now, Subject Eleven," she cringed as he spoke the name she never wanted to hear again, "I know you can see how precarious this situation is. You're a smart girl, always have been. Surely you know I have called backup, surely you know that there is no escape from this. Plus," he gestured with a pointed finger back to Mike, "I don't think you are in a particularly good position to even try and escape."

El's anger flared and fanned as Brenner mocked and chastised, her fist clenching around the flashlight. Behind her, El could hear how Mike's breathing had become unsteady and wheezy. She didn't need to look back to know that he needed help *immediately* .

"So," Brenner continued, eyes twinkling wickedly. "I have a little compromise. Tell me where Twelve and Thirteen are, and I will let your little friends over there go home."

El kept her face as neutral as possible, trying not to reveal the disgust that was crawling to the surface. Scoffing, El tried to steady how her outstretched hand shook.

“There is no compromise,” she hissed at him, “I know exactly how you operate. The second I tell you, we’re all dead.”

Even though the both know it to be true, El’s face twisted in fury as Brenner chuckled to himself, patronizing her with just a *look*.

El wanted to give in, she wanted to *crush* him, but those guns were still pointed at Mike and Hopper, and she couldn’t risk anything.

“Oh, Eleven,” Brenner laughed. “Now why would I kill you when I’ve missed you *so much* .” Her stomach twisted and sank and she *hated him* with her whole being. “You are of no use to me dead you *stupid* girl, but alive, oh alive, the three of you could become a team again. Work together once more, oh the possibilities are *endless* .”

El glared at him and bit back several profanity-laced remarks. There was an energy building up inside her, pushing, begging to be let free. It wanted to *hurt* him, wanted to *kill* him, wanted to *punish* him in all the ways he’d punished her.

She was about to let it free, let it kill, when a small wave of motion caught the corner of her eye. Even in the dim glow of the emergency lights, El could distinctly see two figures silently moving down the staircases that lay above all of them.

Looking closely, but not letting her face reveal this new information, El saw a rush of bright red hair silently dash down a set of stairs.

Max.

Max had a plan, El didn’t know what it was, but there was a plan. Glaring back up at Brenner, El decided that the best thing to do was to distract him a little while longer.

Standing up straighter and maintaining her ground, El steadied her outstretched arm, keeping her powers at bay until *just* the right moment.

“Why?” She bit, gripping the flashlight just a bit tighter. “Why did you do this to us? To me? *Why?*”

Though she said it out of hope that it would allow Max—and now Lucas as she could vaguely see—more time to do...whatever it was they were going to do, El knew that in the back of her mind, it was a real question. She really *did* want to know why she’d been subjected to such torture and pain for her entire life.

Brenner just smiled, as if it was the exact question he was hoping she’d ask.

“Oh, Eleven. I believe a far better question is, why not?”

El frowned, brow furrowing. Behind her, El heard the dull *thud* of Hopper lowering a semi-conscious Mike to the floor, pressing him up against the wall. Hopper was muttering curses to himself and El felt her confidence waver.

“You and Twelve and Thirteen are capable of *so much*, it would be a waste not to test and push the limits of your abilities. You were made this way for a reason, and it is simply up to me to expand upon and further explore the realm of possibilities, for scientific purposes.”

Her powers were just *begging* to come to the surface, but El held back. She was absolutely disgusted, revolted by the way in which Brenner spoke of them, like they were things to be studied, like they belonged in one of Mike’s textbooks.

She wanted to curse at him, yell and scream, but Max and Lucas were moving closer, still undetected. Max was holding something in her hand, something big and box-like, but the light was too dim, El couldn’t make it out.

“Now,” Brenner continued. “If you want your friends to die a nice, quick death rather than a slow, painful one, why don’t you go ahead and tell me where Twelve and Thirteen are.”

Sharp electric blue light sparked up from the stairwell behind Brenner and the guards, bursting like fireworks, sending sparks out and illuminating the platform. In a flash, they twisted around just in

time to see Max standing strong with the box—now what looked like a soon-to-explode laptop—held high above her head, a smug grin painting her face.

“I’m right here you *fucking asshole* , come and get me!”

El couldn’t tell how she knew, but she knew *that* was the signal.

The two guards closest to Max and Lucas rushed forward, weapons ready for a fight. But they were not quick enough, as Lucas jumped out at them, stunning them through the protective blanket of sparks that Max was creating.

Smiling slowly as she watched them fall, El focused her mind.

Letting her powers reign free, El dropped the flashlight and let the surge of energy rush up from within her, bursting out from her outstretched palms.

The remaining guards spun around and aimed their guns just in time for El to feel their skulls beneath the weight of her power. Clenching her fingers tightly together, she let her anger run out, let it control her, let it *crush* them.

Squeezing, compressing, squishing their minds from the inside, El watched with rapt glory as Bald Spot and Soul Patch bled from their eyes, from the ears, from their noses, just...everywhere.

It was done in a second, and though the wave of exhaustion threatened to pull her under, El wouldn’t let it, instead switching her gaze to Brenner, who stared with wide eyes at his fallen guards.

She let Brenner’s fear and his shift in the knowledge that *he* wasn’t in charge anymore empower her, encourage her to stay on her feet.

“I’ve learned a few tricks since I last saw you, Brenner. But what can I say, I’m a smart girl, always have been.” El repeated, grinning at him with malicious revenge. “As is Max, isn’t that right?”

El let her eyes roll off Brenner’s shocked expression to where Max stood, holding the now bursting-at-the-seams laptop over her head.

Max was smiling with pure delight and amusement, like this was the best day of her life.

“Couldn’t have said it any better, El.”

Max took a few careful steps towards Brenner, the shower of sparks ready to absolutely combust.

“Hey asshole, watch this,” she sneered before throwing the burning computer over the railing, letting it fall down, down, down, all the way to the very bottom floor.

El didn’t know what she expected, but it certainly wasn’t the small explosion that rippled through the air, igniting the basement floor in a carpet of flames.

Brenner let out a cry and leant over the railing, staring down at the fire that was beginning to grow all those floors down. El’s eyes widened and she shared a cautious look with Max, who was simply grinning from ear to ear. Brenner pulled back, glaring between El and Max with such ferocity that El wondered if he was deciding who to attack first.

Apparently, he chose Max.

“You *bitch* !” Brenner cried, his face twisting in rage as he pounced at her, hands outstretched and aimed for her neck. Max took a quick step back out of instinct, but it was entirely unnecessary, as El was, for once, one step ahead of Brenner.

Lifting her hand, she let her power wrap around Brenner’s throat, stopping him mid-step. She twisted him around, lifting him into the air, allowing her to face him once more. Squeezing with a tight grasp, El let her power do what it wanted, she let it squeeze and crush and *kill*.

The air was turning smokey, and heat was rising quickly in the building, but El wasn’t worried, this wouldn’t take *too* much time.

Squeezing his throat tighter, El watched with an unsettling amount of satisfaction as Brenner’s face turned an ugly shade of deep red.

Max moved to stand next to her, slowly placing her hand in El’s open

one before entwining their fingers. As Brenner's face turned to a deep purple, he began choking out last words, last utterances. But El only had one thing to say before he lost the ability to hear her.

"This is for Will—" she hissed at him.

"—You psychotic, evil shitbag," Max finished.

Smiling slightly, El gave Brenner's neck one more tight squeeze before releasing him completely, his body dropping with a *thud* to the ground floor.

For a moment, they just stood there, staring at his unmoving body.

El couldn't tell if he was dead or not, but honestly, she didn't really care. He was on the ground, and they were still standing, and that was all that mattered.

El turned to Max and gave her a weak smile, one in which Max returned instantly. The fire below was rising, and people were beginning to scramble up and down the stairs to the exits, so they *really* needed to go, but El let the moment happen for one more moment, one more minute in which she and Max were victorious and nothing else mattered.

A shout from behind brought them out of their moment, and suddenly the world was rushing back into view.

El spun around and saw that the shout had come from Hopper, who was scrambling up the stairs with a still semi-conscious Mike hauled up against his side.

"Mike..." El breathed in a rush of panic.

Giving Max's hand a quick, knowing squeeze, El let go and ran to Mike's side, pulling his other arm around her shoulder in order to help Hopper bring him up. She wrapped her hand around her back and held onto his side, still so cold despite the rising temperature.

Max and Lucas pulled the platform door out and held it open for the three of them to pass through. The air in the hallway was clearer than in the stairwell, but El could tell that the fire was rising quickly,

and they didn't want to be anywhere nearby when it was completely engulfed.

Holding Mike's shivering body close to hers, El listened for the door slam telling her that Max and Lucas were right behind them. As soon as she heard it, they took off, the five of them moving in a quick, silent formation down the hallway and towards the service exit door.

Max and Lucas, unburdened by Mike's deadweight body, rushed forward as they were able to run faster. Pulling the service door open, a flood of sunlight ripped through the hall, and a flush of cool, wintery air whipped at their faces.

The van was right where they'd left it, and Steve and Dustin were still sitting in the front seats, heads jerking up as the noise of the door opening burst through the otherwise quiet day.

Sirens were sounding off in the distance, but El didn't have time to worry about that, she couldn't, not with Mike barely breathing.

"Start the engine!" Max yelled, moving to grip the door handle.

Yanking the back door open, Hopper and El piled into the van before carefully lifting Mike up and over the threshold.

"On the floor, right there, we set up a place for him," Steve's voice echoed through the van as he gestured to the space behind the driver's seat.

El glanced down and sure enough there was a small, blanketed area all set up. They'd even been so nice as to include a pillow. She would've smiled and been more appreciative had it not been for the low groans sounding off from Mike's split lip, sending her into a wave of worry.

She and Hopper gently laid Mike down across the space, setting his head gently against the pillow. Looking around frantically, El caught sight of Lucas slamming the back door shut.

"Alright, let's go!" Hopper yelled, prompting Steve to take off in a jerk of motion. Hopper's voice was strong, but El could see that his face was masked with shock. For a moment she wondered if that was

too much for him, if maybe it was his first taste in the life they'd been living. She couldn't ponder too much on it though, there were more pressing matters to attend to.

El moved to sit behind Mike's head. Although the little sleeping area was nice, she really just needed to be close to him, to feel him in her arms. Sitting criss-crossed, El gently lifted Mike's head and lay it in her lap before beginning to stroke back the hair on his forehead with soft, slow fingers. Her eyes glazed over as he continued to groan painfully, although his expression had seemed to relax as she held him.

"Lucas, please, can you—" El started, glancing up to look for the healer. She hadn't needed to, though, for he was already starting to sit down.

El sighed deeply but watched in fascination as Lucas moved Hopper's jacket off of Mike's shoulders, allowing El to see the extent of his injuries for the first time in decent lighting.

Burns plagued the sides of his torso, bruises and cuts prominent on his stomach and chest. His face was a mess of blood and bruising, and there was a deep cut on the side of his head. Mike's wrists might have been the worst off, though, for deep cut marks had sliced into his skin, right where the cuffs had been. On his left arm there was a bone that looked a little...off, and El winced as Lucas took hold of it, closing his eyes and somehow *pressing* it back into place.

Lucas took a few minutes to slowly press his palms against each and every injury, making most, but not all, injuries fade away within moments. The cuts on Mike's wrists remained, although they seemed like mere shadows of what they had been minutes before. Some of the more rough and deep burns also left faded scars along his ribcage.

The cut along the side of his head would also leave a scar, but as Lucas claimed, "Mike's got so much hair that you won't even notice it."

Lucas took his time, fixing Mike up, and once again El was blown away by how incredible he was, at how natural and altruistic Lucas

was with his abilities. She would tell him one day how grateful she was for him, but for now, all she could manage was, “Thank you.”

The van bumped along the road as they drove back to Steve’s house, none of them really talking much.

As soon as Lucas was done healing (a thankfully sleeping) Mike, El had pulled the blankets out, wrapping him up as tight as she could, trying to warm him up.

She cradled his head in her lap, running her hand through his hair, fingers gently scraping along his scalp as he got some much needed rest. El gazed at him peacefully, drinking in the sight of him being there, *alive*, with her, safe where she could hold him and protect him and love him.

El knew she would stay that way forever if it was her choice, but exhaustion was tugging at her brain, and the gentle sway of the van was so calming after such chaos, that she fell asleep only moments later.

Notes for the Chapter:

I vote for some nice fluff after this beast of a chapter.

Anyone in?

-AJ

24. Scars

Steve pulled the van up to the house an hour later, the glow of the late afternoon light stretching lazily through the windows.

A strange atmosphere had settled over the group as they drove along, a sort of silence that reflected the shock and disbelief of everything that had happened. The air was tense, heavy with the weight of fresh memories burning in their minds.

Max sat static, her hand entwined with Lucas's, her head on his shoulder. They hadn't yet talked about what exactly *this* was, but as Lucas rubbed his thumb along the back of her hand, as she burrowed against his side, Max knew *this* was something real.

They all smelt of smoke, and the nerves had only just stopped making them so jumpy, but there was only one thought running through Max's mind as Steve pulled the van to a stop, only one thing that she could think about.

It's over.

Will sat anxiously on the edge of the bed, twisting his fingers around in the quilted blanket, channeling his frantic nerves in the way his fist clenched and unclenched the fabric, his stomach turning and mind reeling all the while.

He didn't like being alone in this strange house.

Every creak made him jump, every shadow got his pulse racing, and when he closed his eyes, he was *back* . Back and trapped and *alone* .

The minutes ticked into hours, and the hours passed by at a snail's pace, and he was *still* alone.

Will didn't know if his friends were safe, if they were alive, he didn't know if they were coming back or if they had gotten stuck. Will had no idea if *Hopper* was okay, didn't know if he'd overestimated his stepfather's abilities against those people, didn't know if he'd ever

make it back. Will just *didn't know* and it was killing him.

Slowly, he pushed his bare feet to the carpet floor, steadying himself as he stood upright. Will was still extremely weak, if the way his head spun with stars was any indication, but he knew that if he just sat around waiting any longer, he may go crazy.

Pacing up and down the hallway with trepid, slightly limping steps, Will decided to fill his whirring mind with something more...hopeful, something more distracting. Or rather, *someone* .

Seeing Hopper again after seven years was one thing, for while he'd only been Will's stepfather for a few months at the time of the kidnapping, Hopper had been a very prominent father-figure for the majority of Will's childhood, always over, 'helping' his mom around the house.

But the thought of reuniting with his mom, his *mom*, the sheer thought made him nauseous, his stomach flipping around.

Will was desperate to see her again, *desperate* . After all, the hope and thought of seeing her face again had kept him going through the especially tough and tricky days, but at the same time, it made him more terrified than ever.

Bringing a shaking finger up to his teeth, Will bit at his fingernails as he paced, reminiscing about the last time he'd seen her, when she'd dropped him off at school, ruffling his hair as he dove out of the car, his face flaming with embarrassment.

Moreso, he remembered how he'd snapped at her, telling her he wasn't a baby, that he didn't want people from school to see.

In his darkest moments, on the days when the solitary and isolation had really gotten to him, Will had ceaselessly beat himself up wondering *why* he'd been so embarrassed by his mom's show of love. *Why* did he shirk away from her touch? *Why* did he yell at her? *Why* did he reject her when she was just being a kind, loving mother?

She hated him, he was sure of it. Maybe she thought he had run away because he didn't love her. Maybe she didn't want him anymore,

even now that he was free. Maybe she was glad he was gone, out of her hair, maybe she wanted to keep it that way. After all, how could such an incredible mother be worried about such a rude and careless son like him?

Nevertheless, for seven long years, Will daydreamed and imagined what he would say if he ever escaped, if he ever got the chance to see her again, even if just for a minute.

He continued his slow pacing until the rumble of gravel under tires pulled his hyper-fixated mind out of its depressive wondering.

“El, we’re back. Ellie, honey, wake up,” a soft voice cajoled in her ear.

El groaned and tightened her arms around the lump of blankets that she’d pulled to her chest. Light was etching the edges of her vision, trying to get in, a hand on her back was trying as well. But she was so *warm* and happy, she didn’t want to move.

“El, we need to get him inside.”

In the back of her mind, she knew the voice was right, but everything was so hazy and soft, and for some reason the blankets clutched against her were *breathing* in time with the rise and fall of her own chest, so El opted to keep her eyes shut.

That is, until a rumbling groan sounded from the blankets, allowing the world to quickly rush into view.

El’s eyes snapped open with a jolt, her fingers tightening their grip on the blanket as her mind whipped awake. Her eyes jerked around, taking in the glowing interior of the van.

Max was staring down at her, her long red hair spilling over her shoulder as she tilted her head, seeing as El was laid on her side. Max’s blue eyes were boring into El’s own, her expression kind and knowing in a way that only she could be. Lucas stood behind her, but he didn’t seem to be paying attention, instead engaging in deep conversation with Hopper as they opened the back door of the van.

Max, seemingly satisfied now that El was up, gave her a small smile before squeezing her shoulder gently.

“Let me know if you need help with him,” she said softly, nodding down to the pile of blankets clutched to El’s chest.

El frowned, her eyebrows tiredly pulling together in confusion as the redhead turned around and climbed out of the van, shouting at Lucas (and what looked like Dustin, but it might have been Steve) to wait up.

El blinked slowly in the haze of the afternoon sun, the cold air from outside spilling into the van, making her shiver as it bit at her cheeks. Curling her shoulders inward, El groggily wondered what exactly Max was going on about.

She didn’t have to wonder long, however, as her question was answered with another groan coming from the blankets.

Reality slammed into focus and all of a sudden she *remembered* .

El’s breath caught in her throat and her gaze jerked downwards, her desperate eyes frantically scanning the blankets, looking for *him* . As it turned out, she didn’t need to look very hard.

El didn’t know how it had happened, but in her exhaustion-induced sleep, she’d hooked her arms underneath Mike’s from behind, her legs wrapping around his in a sort of koala-positioning. She was holding him against her with everything she had, his blanketed back pressed against her front. Mike’s head was resting beneath her chin, his black, tufty hair tickling her neck.

He was much too tall to be held completely—his legs stretched far beyond where El’s stopped and his bare feet poked out the end of the blankets—but El just gripped him tighter, relishing the feeling of him being so close to her.

Sighing in relief, El pressed a gentle kiss to the top of his head before turning and resting her cheek against his mop of hair, gripping her arms tighter around his chest.

She let the feeling sink in, let his breathing fuel her own, let her fear

and anger and exhaustion from the past hours rush out in exchange for the love and reassurance of Mike's body pressed against hers.

El couldn't tell if he was awake, but by the way his chest rose and fell, long and deep, she figured he was still out. She would have let him stay there, resting for as long as he needed, but the cold air was still pricking at their exposed skin, making them both shiver beneath the thin blankets.

With a jolt, El realized that although she was wearing a nice heavy jacket, Mike had no shirt on beneath the blankets, and was likely freezing.

"Mike," she sighed against the top of his head, lifting a hand to push his tangled hair back gently. "Mike, let's go inside."

He stirred a bit, grumbling softly under his breath but nevertheless keeping his eyes shut.

Sighing slowly, El continued running her fingers through his hair, careful to stay away from the now-scarring cut on the side of his head, wondering if she was strong enough yet to just *float* him to the house.

As she was thinking, goosebumps began prickling up on the skin of Mike's bare shoulders, and in the back of her (very amused) mind El wondered if it was just from the cold or if he was having a visceral reaction to her soft touch in his hair.

She sighed again, a small smile etching onto her face. Hugging him closely, El rested her cheek against the top of his head, whispering once more.

"Mike, wake up. You're safe, let's go get you warm."

She could tell her voice was lulling him awake slowly, as he nestled stubbornly back against her.

"Mike," she urged gently, "I would float you, but I don't think I'm strong enough just yet, you have to help me."

Mike grumbled some more, and this time she could make out just the

hint of words.

“Please...n’yet...good dream...”

She smiled lovingly against his hair, her arms tightening around his blanketed chest. “Mike, you can keep resting inside, but we really need to—”

She didn’t get to finish her thought, as all of a sudden, Mike’s whole body jerked, ripping away from her grasp as he scrambled up. El snapped up as well, sitting on her knees, her eyes widening in confusion and panic at the sudden rush of motion.

Mike was suddenly breathing very rough and harsh, a stark contrast to the gentle rise and fall from only seconds before. The blanket had slipped off his shoulders as he jolted up, the faded but still prominent scarring from the burns now standing out against his pale skin of his torso. But what hurt her more than anything was the sheer amount of blood still painted on his body, despite the fact the cuts and slashes had been healed.

El’s heart clenched as Mike spun around to face her, lifting his hands in self-defense as he whirled around. As he did so, El caught sight of the deep cuts encircling both of his wrists, and a few sobering shocks were sent down her spine.

Mike’s eyes were wide and clouded with terror as he stared at her, his chest heaving and his frantic gaze darting around her face.

It was as if they were back in the cell once more. El didn’t know what to do as she stared helplessly at him, mouth agape, wondering what it was about *her* that was making him so frightened.

“Mike...” she cooed, heart dropping as he flinched. “It’s me, you’re safe.”

His eyes were still foggy, staring at her like she was a complete stranger.

“Hey...hey, you’re okay. It’s...It’s *me* , it’s El...” She tried again, scooting closer to him.

El took it as a good sign that he didn't flinch away from her as she moved forward, but her heart *ached* at the hurt in his eyes, at the fear and panic lurking below the surface.

What had they done to him? Why was he so afraid of her?

Biting her lip, El thought back to the cell. *What had helped him then?*

In a flash, El remembered his fixation with her hair, she remembered how he'd run his trembling fingers through it, how it somehow grounded him, made him believe she was real.

As fast as she could, El tugged at the elastic band keeping her hair up in it's messy bun, pulling it out and allowing the dark tresses to fall in a wave of loose curls.

"Look," she urged, cautiously reaching forward to take one of his shaking hands in her own. Gently, she pulled it up and pressed it into her thick hair. "Look, it's me."

Mike didn't move for a few seconds, just stared trepidly with his fingers weakly tangled in her hair. His face was twisted with a mess of emotions, his eyebrows knitted together and mouth hanging open slightly. Confusion, fear, and hesitation were among those flashing across his eyes. It was like he was being assaulted with a tidal wave of thoughts and feelings, and just couldn't pick out which was right.

El's heart hammered as she waited for him to move, keeping her determined gaze locked on his uncertain one.

Then, finally, Mike's fingers began to move. Slowly, he let his fingertips run across the tangled locks, grazing the side of El's head as they went. She shivered at his touch despite how hesitant it was.

El's shoulders sagged gratefully as the clouding in his eyes began to clear.

"See..." she murmured, moving close enough to gently cup his jaw in her hand. She rubbed her thumb along the side, frowning at how his teeth were beginning to chatter. "You're safe."

It was like they were the words he needed more than air. Letting out

a breath she didn't know he was holding, Mike slumped against her, settling his forehead against the crook of her neck and breathing out deeply.

"Holy fuck..." he muttered into her shoulder, his voice shaky and broken.

El sighed and closed her eyes, relieved that it had worked, whatever it was. Mike hummed as El reached up and twisted her fingers in the hair at the back of his neck, her other arm going up to wrap around his bare shoulders, completely uncaring about the dried blood coating his back.

They sat for a moment, shivering in the back of the van, letting the world fade away and the ease settle in.

Mike's hands had initially fallen limp at his sides when he'd collapsed against her, but as the seconds ticked by, El felt as they began to creep up and around her waist, clutching desperately at the fabric of her jacket. She smiled softly and moved ever closer, letting him hold her as much as she was holding him.

After a few minutes, Mike pulled back, not releasing his hold on her but lifting his head just enough in order to gaze around and take in his surroundings.

"Where are we?" He asked hesitantly, his brow furrowing. He swiveled his eyes around the van before staring out the back of the open door. "Who's house is that?"

El followed his gaze and looked out at Steve's house, the front door ajar and *very* inviting.

"We're at Steve's house," she said simply, hoping he would know what she was talking about without needing to explain it all. After all, she'd passed out in the van right after Mike was taken, so she didn't really know the full story herself. However, she wasn't so lucky as he just looked back at her, his face twisting in even more confusion.

"Steve? Who's Steve?" He asked.

El dropped her eyes down to her lap, trying to remember what Dustin had said.

“Um, Dustin said he’s...he’s...like a brother? I-I think his last name has an H in it, but I’m not—”

“Steve *Harrington* ?” Mike inquired suddenly, his eyes snapping back to hers and widening significantly. “We’re at *Steve Harrington’s* house?”

El looked back quickly, confused nervousness etching onto her features.

“I-I think so, I don’t really know, I was kind of...out of it,” she answered slowly, her voice dropping off at the end.

Mike’s eyes swiveled back to the house and his mouth dropped open slightly in dumbfounded awe.

“Huh,” he murmured, looking more befuddled at this than anything else.

As he looked out, a sharp, icy gust of wind rushed in the van, causing a new wave of goosebumps to break out across his skin.

“Mike, we need to go inside before you freeze to death. Can you walk?”

Mike’s gaze landed back on her and without saying anything, he untangled his arms from around her and stretched his legs out, wiggling his toes.

“I-I think so,” he said after a beat. El nodded, grabbing the blanket that had pooled at his waist and draping it over his shoulders. He took it appreciatively, fingers gripping the edges and tugging it tighter around his shivering frame.

Moving to the edge of the van, El clasped a hand on Mike’s arm, ready to help him if need be.

El jumped out first, surprised slightly at how shakey her own legs were as her sneakers landed on the gravel. Mike followed behind her,

albeit much slower and cautious, wincing as his bare feet hit the rocks below.

“Okay?” She asked softly, adjusting her grip so that one arm wrapped around his back while the other clutched his arm. Mike closed his eyes for a moment, seeming to gather his bearings before nodding.

Despite the fact El knew she wasn’t strong enough to be using her powers too much, she reached out and let her energy wrap around his frame, holding him up just enough for them to walk.

Together, they slowly ambled to the house, El slamming the van door behind them with a jerk of her head.

Steve’s house was a whirl of noise and motion the second they entered it. Everyone seemed to be in deep, energetic discussions. El’s gaze darted around confusedly as she took in the scene.

Hopper and Max stood in the entryway of the kitchen, appearing to be in a loud argument judging by the way they were both gesturing wildly in the open air. El adjusted her grip around Mike’s back and tried to strain her ears to listen, but Max and Hopper were both yelling over one another loudly enough that she couldn’t make out what either were talking about.

Will and Lucas sat on the couch in the adjoining living room, watching them with equal parts amusement and concern. Every so often, one would whisper to the other, though El couldn’t tell what it was they were saying.

Steve and Dustin were running in between Hopper and Max, one hurriedly making food in the kitchen while the other darted around, grabbing pillows and blankets from spare closets and rooms. Every so often, they would switch, hollering orders at one another in what looked like a practiced routine.

El glanced up to Mike, her lips beginning to twitch up in a smile at their crazy friends, but they dropped instantly when she saw how pale he’d gotten *just* from the walk to the house from the van. Her powers tightened around him without her meaning to, acting on pure instinct more than anything.

None of their friends had seemed to notice that they'd come in, all of them very absorbed in their own actions. El nudged Mike slightly, motioning to the set of rooms down the hall.

"Hey, let's go get you warmed up," she mumbled, leaning her head against the blanket wrapped around his arms. "I'm sure a shower sounds good."

Mike's deep sigh of agreement was all the answer she needed. Moving out of sight of the kitchen, El helped Mike down the hallway and into a spare room, checking to make sure there was a bathroom attached.

Closing the door behind them, she helped him sit down on the tall bed, rubbing her thumbs gently across his blanketed arms before rushing around the room, turning on the shower and checking to make sure he'd have everything he'd need.

"Okay," El said as she re-entered the room, speaking quickly as she moved to stand in front of him. "So, the blood should wash off pretty easy in the shower, but you have to be careful of the burns. Lucas did what he could, but you'll...you'll have some scars."

She paused and let Mike take it in. He was gazing up at her from where he sat, and even though El could tell he was listening, she was pretty sure the sound of the shower was distracting him.

"Just...don't touch anywhere that hurts," she went on, her heart clenching. "I'll help with the burns and scars once you're all done. Lucky for you, I'm kind of an expert with that stuff," El joked dryly, absentmindedly running her fingers over one of her own scars sitting beneath her ribs.

Mike glanced between her and the bathroom, and for some reason El could tell that there was something else on his mind. Something else he wasn't saying.

"Hey," she murmured, gently placing her hands one either side of his face. Despite the fact he was sitting and she was standing, they were relatively at the same height. "What's wrong?"

Mike looked up at her and for an instant, the flash of child-like fear danced across his eyes. He pursed his lips and tightened his grip on the blanket shrouding his torso.

“Can you...Can you stay in there with me?” He asked, his voice smaller than she’d ever heard before. “I don’t...I don’t want to be alone.”

El’s heart sunk, her body flushing with sorrow and empathy. Her mind going on autopilot, El moved to stand between Mike’s legs, her knees bumping the edge of the bed as she slid her arms around his back. It seemed like exactly the thing he needed, considering how his hands slipped around her waist, pulling her ever closer. El buried her face in Mike’s neck, letting out a deep sigh as he did the same.

For a while they stayed that way, entwined together, holding each other with all the strength they had left.

“Of course I’ll stay with you,” El whispered after a minute, pressing a soft kiss to his neck.

El sat with her back pressed up against the doorframe as Mike showered, talking loudly enough that he would be able to hear her over the sound of the running water.

She filled him in on all of the events of the last day, of how they’d rescued Will, of how they met Steve, of how they contacted Hopper. She told him everything she could remember, although her account wasn’t great considering how murky and muddled she had felt at the time it occurred.

It was easier filling him in this way, with the literal barrier of the shower curtain keeping her from getting too emotional and upset. She could relay everything he needed to know without feeling too attached to the memories of it all.

Steve had knocked on the door while El was recounting how she’d woken up to the sound of arguing, offering some warm clothes for Mike for when he was ready. She’d taken them gladly, happy to see

that Steve had provided a plethora of options, everywhere from jeans to sweats.

El closed her eyes when Mike was done showering, waiting until he gave her the verbal cue that it was alright to look.

He stood in front of the mirror, gripping the edge of the sink. El saw from her spot on the bed that Mike had opted for the dark blue sweats over all the other options. Although his legs were a little too long for them, so his ankles popped out at the bottom.

Making a mental note to find some socks when she got the chance, El let her eyes rake up to his chest—still bare as she wanted to check on his burns and scars. El was relieved to see that the blood was all gone, but her heart hurt to see all the signs of violence splattered on his abdomen and torso.

His hair was pushed over to the side, flopping over on the right side of his head rather than in one collective mass. El figured this was to give the cut over his ear some room to breathe, and she wouldn't admit it, but this new style made her heart start hammering in a whole *different* way.

Mike was watching her intently, almost like he was waiting for her approval to step forward. Giving him a small smile, El stood up and walked to the doorway, her brown eyes never leaving his dark ones.

“Warmer?” She asked, leaning a shoulder against the doorframe, barely resisting the urge to reach out and wrap him up in her arms.

Mike nodded sullenly, not daring to take his eyes off her. She wondered if maybe he thought she would disappear in the same way she was worried he would.

“Is it okay if I look at those?” El asked softly, nodding to the scars sprinkled across his pale skin. He didn't say anything, instead stepping forward and into her space as a way of saying yes.

Pushing all urges to hug him and hold him as tight as possible down as far as they could go, El turned her focus to each and every injury. Lifting her fingers to gently poke and scan, El worked her way across

his skin, studying each spot with a mixture of intense guilt and fury.

It was *her* fault. Mike got hurt *because* of her. Maybe not because of anything she did directly, but simply existing in his life had caused all of this to happen to him. She felt like an infection, seeping into his perfectly normal life, twisting it and changing it for the worse rather than for the better.

“You said...” Mike started, and El could feel his eyes burning on her. “You said you were an expert with this stuff...” He said it slowly, like he was afraid of the words coming out of his mouth. “What did you mean?”

El’s fingers stopped their roaming, and slowly she lifted her eyes to meet his. He looked confused, confused and curious, but also nervous at the same time. El tried to think of what to say, how to explain that she’d been in this position hundreds of times before. How to say she’d been hurt and burned and weak more times than not, how to put into words the level of normalcy this had been for the majority of her life.

Instead, El opted not to say anything. After a moment, she gathered her courage and took a step back, not daring to take her eyes off of his. Mike’s brows furrowed together at the lack of closeness, but he didn’t object, instead letting her *show* him exactly what she meant.

El shrugged her jacket off, letting it fall to the floor in a heap. Then, taking a deep breath, she let her fingers wrap around the bottom of her shirt before lifting it up, twisting it off her body and over her head. She dropped it next to her jacket and let her arms fall, standing before Mike in only her bra and leggings.

It was the first time she’d been this exposed to him, and if there was ever a time for her to feel self-conscious, it would be now. But gazing up at him, his eyes traversing the plane of her upper body, she’d never felt calmer.

Lifting her arm, El took hold of Mike’s hand, gently pulling it forward and onto her shoulder.

“This...” she said, letting his fingers trace over the long, thin scar running down her shoulder and onto her back, “...was from when I

was too tired to keep doing tests.”

El watched as his breath caught in his throat, wishing she didn't have to show him, but knowing she needed to, so that he could *understand* . She moved his now trembling fingers up to the back of her neck, where the deeply ingrained needle spots still remained.

“These were from shots that they'd inject into the base of my skull. To get blood, I think.”

Mike was breathing harder now, judging by the way his chest rose and fell harshly. Taking a deep breath of her own, El guided his hand down to just below the band of her bra, letting his fingers glide along the massive scarred tissue resting all around her ribs and lower abdomen.

It was the thing she was most insecure about, all the scars and marks and craters left at the hands of those *people* . El hated looking at it, hated seeing her past etched into her skin like that. She'd hardly ever let even *Max* see all the damage that had been done over the years, let alone anyone else.

But El trusted Mike. She *loved* Mike. She wanted to share this with him.

“I'm an expert,” she said softly. “Even though I don't want to be.”

Mike let out a raggedy breath, and El's heart broke at the way his chin wobbled, tears forming at the corners of his eyes. Without saying anything, Mike let his arms slide all the way around her slim waist, pulling her up to his chest and wrapping her up in his embrace.

El let her hands move on their own, gliding up around his neck and holding on tight. She buried her face in the space between his neck and his shoulder and let all of her bottled up fears and worries pour out in heavy-hearted sobs.

Mike seemed to be needing the same thing, for not a moment later, El felt his chest heave beneath her own, shuddering in the same way she was.

They stood embracing for a while longer, crying and whispering and just *being* together.

Eventually, El slid her shirt back on, blushing as she did so. Mike as well put on a long-sleeve sweater recovered from the pile of clothes that Steve left for him.

Neither of them said anything about it, but they both knew to climb under the covers of the bed. Gravitating together in one wave of motion rather than two separate entities.

They curved in on one another the second they had the chance to. Laying her head against his chest, El looped her arm around Mike's waist, careful not to put too much pressure on the spots she knew held aching scars and bruises. He in turn folded her into his arms, sighing deeply and reaching a hand up to tangle in her hair.

El shut her eyes and let the feeling of his fingers in her dark, wavy tresses overwhelm her. She let *him* in, let him encompass her and hold her and love her.

Mike's hand was so soothing in her hair, his breathing so strong and steady, that she was almost lulled to sleep. But just before she shut her eyes for the night, the hand reminded her what she needed to ask.

"Mike?" She mumbled, her voice muffled against his shirt. He hummed in response but didn't stop the lazy stroking in her hair. "When...when I woke you up, both times, you were...you were...scared of me." Mike's hand froze against her scalp. "And in the stairwell, with...with *him* , he said they used some sort of...trick on you."

Despite the fact that Mike had stiffened beneath her, his arms were beginning to tighten, pulling her closer to him, like he was afraid she'd try to leave if he let go.

A long beat passed before he spoke again, quiet, angry in the winter glow of the room.

"They...they had someone *like* you," he said finally, voice rumbling

against her ear pressed to his chest.

El frowned, pursing her lips. “ *Like* me, as in powers and abilities?” She asked.

He shook his head. “Yes. No. Well,” Mike paused, choosing his words carefully. “She had powers for sure. They would bring her in when I was waking up. She...I think her powers had something to do with shapeshifting, o-or making people see things...I don’t know,” he rambled.

El tightened her hold on his waist. “See things?”

Another long beat passed before Mike spoke again.

“She made herself look like you.”

At this El sat up, spinning around to face him. Her eyes were wide and filled with concern, hair falling over one shoulder as she leaned over where he lay.

“Look like me?” She questioned fervently, hands going out to grip his tightly.

He nodded somberly, his eyes roaming her concerned face. He reached a hand up slowly and started tracing the curve of her cheekbone with his thumb. El relaxed slightly but caught sight of the raw, red line curving around his wrist, and instantly she felt the tension in her shoulders return.

“She made herself look like you, but from a long time ago,” he said after a minute, a haunted look in his eyes. “You couldn’t have been more than fifteen. So young and...and so hollow. *He* said that they based it on some old picture of you, from before you’d...before you’d escaped. You...the fake you...your head was shaved.”

And all of a sudden the pieces were clicking into place. El sighed, leaning into the hand on her cheek, deflating like a burst balloon.

Of course .

Brenner had used some sort of false-her to try and trick Mike. To try

and get him to spill. To torture him and hurt him and turn him against her. It was genius in the most psychotic way, in a way that only *he* could have done.

El couldn't guess what this fake-her had said to Mike, but there wasn't a doubt in El's mind that it had made him distrust even the idea of seeing her in real life. And when she'd finally come to rescue him, he'd reacted in self-defense, tried protecting himself from her. From the fake-her.

"Oh my god...Mike..." El whispered, eyes filled to the brim with sheer horror.

"I fell for it the first time," he went on, still stroking her cheek. "Thought they'd gotten you too. But then the fake-you kept calling me Michael and didn't know who Dustin or Lucas were. I called them out on it, but it didn't stop them from trying again, and again, and again."

He grinned slowly to himself, and El couldn't understand how he could be smiling at something so horrifying.

"They tried different looks after the first time. Tried to guess what you looked like now that you're older. And El, let me tell you, for some reason they couldn't get it out of their minds that you'd keep your head shaved."

Mike was laughing now, his smile spreading to his eyes as he beamed up at her.

"There were some crazy looks, some more convincing than others, but I knew every time that it wasn't you. Didn't fall for it, I promise." He paused, gazing up at her. "None of 'em said 'I love you' the way that you do."

Mike's smile was practically radiating warmth and light, positively glowing with love. His grin was infectious enough that—even though El was still shocked down to her bones—she found herself beaming back at him, relishing his humor in such a dark time.

Acting on every instinct she had, El slid her hands up and cupped

Mike's cheeks, leaning her head down to press her lips softly against his, closing the gap between them *finally* .

It didn't take him more than half a second to respond, his hands twisting up into her hair, gently tugging on the soft, wavy strands.

Mike kissed her back with the same ferocious passion that she was giving him, opening his mouth just slightly and tracing her lips with his tongue. El groaned softly and welcomed the heat he brought, her whole body igniting as his hands worked their way through her hair.

Staying careful and cautious of the cut lining the side of his head, El began to thread her own fingers through Mike's hair, pressing herself deeper into him. The kiss was slow and lazy, but El couldn't get enough, gliding her lips along his, enveloping her mind with him and only *him*.

After a few heated minutes, El pulled back, slowly sliding her eyes open to beam at him.

"I love you," she grinned, heart leaping at the way he blinked dazedly up at her, gaze full of affection and tenderness and appreciation.

They were both hurting, both wounded and shaken up and traumatized. But as El leaned down again, as Mike wrapped his arms around her back, pulling her flat against him, they both knew that nothing in the world could tear them apart.

Notes for the Chapter:

Ugh, I love my kids. Let me know what you think (as always), but more importantly, let me know what you want to SEE in the few remaining chapters! I'm nothing if not made for fan-service!

-AJ

25. You're It

Notes for the Chapter:

Once again, sorry for the delay! School is really hard! I hope this chapter feels worth the wait, it's a MONSTER at 10k words.

I also want to thank each and every one of you who have commented so far, you really keep me going. I will be doing special shoutouts after the final chapter is over, so keep your eyes peeled for that.

Also, for the sake of this fic (and my sanity) there's no Jonathan or Nancy in this universe! I wanted to have them initially, but there just wasn't enough time. I may have mentioned them in the past, so if I did, ignore that!

Anyways, settle in, this one's like 20 pages long.

-AJ

"I just don't understand how Hopper could be so *dense*," Max barked, aggressively slamming her knife into the jar of peanut butter. Her face was a mix of fury and annoyance, her freckled cheeks heating up as she made her sandwich. Lucas looked on from his spot at the kitchen table with equal parts amusement and fear, not daring to speak up until she was done ranting.

"I mean, he *saw* everything that happened!" She went on, slapping a glob of peanut butter onto the bread. "He saw Mike all... all bloody and everything! He heard everything that Brenner said! For fuck's sake, his own *kid* was kidnapped and tortured for seven *fucking* years! How could he be pissed at *me* for starting a measly little fire?!"

Max huffed in annoyance and roughly pushed together the two sides of her sandwich, jelly dripping out the sides and onto the plate. Leaning against the side of the kitchen counter, she glared at the floor and took a bite, mind running a mile a minute.

Lucas smiled and leaned his elbows on his knees, twisting his fingers together and waiting patiently for her to finish, as he knew she couldn't be done yet.

"It wasn't even a *big* fire!" She went on, gesturing around wildly, her red hair falling out of it's bun and framing her face. "I just...I wanted that place to *burn* ! So I made it burn! Whatever! We already got all the dirt on them anyways, so what's he all pissed about?!"

They both were well aware of what Hopper was all pissed about, as he made it pretty obvious the second they'd gotten back.

Lucas could still hear his booming words echoing through the house.

"There were innocent people in there!"

"Don't sink to their level!"

"We need all the evidence we can get, and if it's all burned up it won't help!"

He'd laid into Max as soon as he got the chance, getting all up in her face and letting his concerns reign free. Lucas didn't know what Hopper was expecting in return, but he couldn't imagine Hopper was ready for Max to start yelling right back at him, her words just as biting and aggressive.

Lucas had taken a seat next to Will on the couch, not nearly brave enough to get in the middle of the screaming match that had ignited between the two. They didn't know each other very well, but Lucas felt a sort of closeness to Will, perhaps some sort of bond left behind by all the healing.

Will seemed to feel the same, as he'd leaned over and whispered, "Good move. Trust me, I know both of them, and neither backs down from a fight."

And neither of them had. The yelling went on for a while before Hopper and Max had both seemed too frustrated to continue, too frustrated and too *exhausted* really. None of them had slept very much in the past few days, and as a result everyone had crashed minutes later, collapsing on the sleeping bags and furniture laid out in Steve's house.

Over a day of sleep and resting later, and Max was still upset.

"I just don't think he's really putting everything into perspective," Max went on, finishing her sandwich and setting the plate in the sink.

Lucas winced as it bumped up against the pile of dishes that were already beginning to stack up, evidence of the amount of Steve's food they'd consumed since their arrival a few days prior.

"And plus, it's not like he made any moves to stop me while we were there!" Max threw her hands up in frustration, her eyes narrowing and her face flushing.

Taking a deep breath, Lucas smiled and rose up, slowly gliding over to where Max stood. Her arms were crossed over her chest and her eyes glared at the floor, her mind clearly preoccupied with her frustration.

Lucas knew Max was making fair points, but he *really* didn't want to crush whatever... *this* was, so he decided to gently try to get through to her.

"I think you're right," he started, setting his hands on Max's arms, untwisting them slowly. With some reluctance, Lucas felt as she let him unfold them and take her hands in his, her shoulders visibly sagging as he drew closer. "But, I also think Hopper is right."

Max frowned, but didn't pull away, slowly bringing her gaze up to meet his.

"After all the *shit* you've been through, you've got every right to burn that place to the ground. I know if it was me, I would want to."

Lucas bit back the words he *really* wanted to say. The ones that condemned Intex and all it had done. The words filled with hatred that had popped into his head the second he saw the state they'd left Will in. The words of disgust and repulsion and abomination that ran through his mind as he healed one friend after another. But he held back his own pain, for he knew it was useless to hold onto, and much less important than that of his friends'.

"And Hopper..." Lucas went on, "I mean, after *seven* years of looking for Will, I think he'd probably want to see the takedown all the way

through. Not just a moment of glory, but more like a real, *legal* takedown, y’know?”

The frown was lessening on her face, but Max didn’t look any less annoyed, her eyebrows knitting together and her nose crinkling as she processed his words.

“Plus,” Lucas went on, moving his hands to cup her cheeks. His lips twitched up as he felt Max lean into his touch. “Hopper works in law enforcement, so he probably knows the legal logistics that are going to take place in the aftermath of this whole thing.”

Lucas paused, beaming at her.

“He’s not pissed at you, he’s just tired and...and thinking of everything that *still* has to happen.”

Lucas studied Max’s expression, his dark eyes boring into her icy blue ones. She gazed back absently, clearly considering his words and taking them in. A minute passed before she finally relaxed and she let her shoulders drop, the tension draining away as her eyes cleared up.

Lucas’s mouth pulled into a tight-lipped smile as she drooped against him, letting her forehead fall against his shoulder. His arms wound around her shoulders on instinct, heart racing as he felt her sigh heavily against him.

They stood together for a minute, pressed against the kitchen counter, letting unspoken words pass between them, as if they’d done it for years.

“Ugh,” Max sighed after a moment, and Lucas felt her arms slowly wind around his waist, holding onto the back of his shirt. “I hate that you’re so right all the time.”

Lucas laughed, a grin stretching across his face as he leaned his head against hers. Pulling back, he beamed as Max’s own lips began twitching up, mirroring his smile.

She was close—really close. Like, close enough that he could feel her soft breath on his face. He could see every bit of her blue eyes, the luminescent hue reminding him vaguely of glaciers from way up

north.

“What can I say, it’s a gift,” he joked, dazedly rubbing his thumb along her cheek.

They were so close, only inches apart. He could kiss her right now. Just do it. Lay one on her. He could, but he wasn’t sure if she wanted that.

Yeah, sure, they’d kissed a few times in the past couple days, but each time they’d been in varying degrees of danger. And honestly, Lucas wasn’t sure if Max had just gotten caught up in the moment and acted on some passionate, we-might-die-might-as-well-go-for-it instinct, or if she really liked him.

It seemed so trivial after all they’d been through, but he *really* didn’t want to push it.

Because he liked her.

A lot.

Nevertheless, Lucas could see that Max’s gaze was darting from his eyes to his lips slowly, and if her heart was hammering in at all the same way his was, then they might be on the same page after all.

“So...” he whispered carefully, not moving an inch forward, but not an inch backwards either. His mind was racing, trying to think up some way to make a move without, like, *making a move*. “What should we—”

“Wanna go make out until the others wake up?” Max interjected, breathless as she looked up at him, a mischievous smile stretching onto her face.

If it was possible for a person to smile so hard that their cheeks could break, Lucas was sure his would be shattered.

God she was so straightforward and honest and real and it was *so hot*.

Deciding not to answer with words, Lucas just let his grin take over

before leaning in and closing the space between them, pressing his lips to hers and sliding a hand into her hair.

Her lips were so soft on his, all warm and inviting and slightly peanut-buttery from her sandwich.

Max kissed him back with the same passion, tightening her grip around his waist as she slanted her mouth against his, pressing harder, taking it to a whole new level.

It was different from their other kisses, as there was no rush, no need to hurry up and get going. No, Lucas could relax this time and take it all in, take *her* all in, and *god* , he never wanted to stop.

But if any of their friends, particularly Dustin, caught them like this, they'd never live it down.

With reluctance, Lucas pulled back, his hand still cupping her head. Max let out a whine at the loss of contact but met his eyes nevertheless.

"The van is still unoccupied," he grinned, one eyebrow tweaking up suggestively. Max's confused expression immediately transformed as a sly smile took over her face. With ease, she clasped her hand around Lucas's before moving forward and tugging him off the edge of the counter.

"You are a genius sometimes, you know that?" She beamed, pulling him out of the kitchen and towards the door.

Lucas just laughed along and followed close behind, in love with the fact that now they had *time* .

The rough spattering of rain against the window woke Mike from a long, well-deserved sleep.

Everything was hazy and quiet, the soft drizzle of rain threatening to lull him back to sleep. He wanted to give in, he wanted to let sleep pull him back under to that dreamy state, but for some reason, Mike felt it was time to wake up.

His body was heavy and exhausted and aching—and something in the back of his mind felt restless and on edge, like his brain was stuck in thick jelly and was trying to work its way out but just couldn't.

But nevertheless, he loved the sound of the rain and he was just so *warm* that he decided to give in and sleep for as long as was allowed.

Snuggling his face deeper into his pillow, Mike decided to let the wave of exhaustion wash over him, letting it consume him before his more rational side told him otherwise.

Just as he was about to slip back under, however, a soft whimper pierced the near-silent room, jerking his mind awake in an instant.

Cracking his eye open just a bit, Mike gradually took in his surroundings. The light was dim, drifting in through the windows and creating a quiet, mellow atmosphere. The rain was pattering harder now, beating against the glass of the windows and the roof. Everything was so hazy and foggy and unclear—and for some reason the side of Mike's head was stinging painfully—that he did not immediately register the fact that he was in an unfamiliar room.

As his sleepy gaze drifted around the room, as he started to recognize—or more so *not* recognize—where he was, Mike's mind jerked awake and in a split second, panic began lurching through his body.

Bad. Danger. Bad.

The words struck through Mike's head like a lightning bolt, whipping him awake and instantly throwing him back to the cell. Back to that *place* where he was so scared and so alone and so hurt.

The thick jelly in his mind was getting stronger and heavier, and though his pulse was racing, begging him to get up and *GO*, Mike didn't dare move an inch. He didn't know what would happen if he moved, he didn't know if he was strapped down, didn't know if someone was watching him didn't know if—

The gentle whimpering echoed through the room again, more urgent this time, more desperate.

The sound, whatever it was, broke through the block in Mike's mind

and he instantly felt his heart rate begin to slow, his mind clearing up and allowing him to see through the dim lighting with newfound clarity.

It was an unfamiliar room, yes, but not a threatening one from what he could tell. There was a large wooden dresser pressed up to the corner of the room, pictures lining the walls, a bathroom door slightly ajar.

Turning his head just slightly, Mike peered over and saw a framed photo sitting on the bedside table. He squinted his gaze, eyebrows knitting together as he tried to make out the people in the photo through the dim lighting.

It was dark, and his eyes were tired, but Mike could recognize that crazy hair from a mile away.

Steve...? What...?

Oh.

Steve.

And it all came rushing back to him.

Laying his head back down on the pillow, Mike shut his eyes as the memories came flooding back in.

Kidnap. Pain. Fire. Safe.

Everything was so heavy all of a sudden, his mind weighing him down with unwelcome thoughts and unwanted recollections of all that had happened.

Pushing his head deeper into the pillow, Mike winced as a sharp pain rushed to a spot just above his ear, and on instinct he went to lift a hand to hold where it hurt. But as he tried to pull his hand up out from under the blanket, he found that something was holding onto him, something was tugging him back down.

Or rather, someone.

Mike's confused gaze drifted down, and with a slightly shocked gasp, he realized that he was not alone in the bed. There was...someone pressed up against him.

His blood flushed with ice cold panic and his eyes widened with fear. Terror was ripping through him over and over again and it wouldn't stop, it would *never* stop.

He began to jerk away, but just as he did so, the person let out another cry, louder this time, more distressed, and Mike froze on the spot.

It wasn't very discernable at first—for the rough spattering of rain was filling the room, overwhelming his senses—but as Mike's mind focused and became clearer, his eyes narrowed, flickering with recognition.

Not daring to move an inch, Mike let the sound fill his ears, fill his mind.

He knew that noise. He'd heard it before.

Gently tugging his hand out of the iron-tight grip it was held in, Mike pulled the blanket down little by little, slowly revealing the person pressed to his chest and— *oh*.

Her head lay just below his, his chin resting over the crown of her head and pressing into her soft, dark hair. She was flushed right up against him, her back resting close enough to his chest that he could feel every single one of her breaths go in and out. Before he'd pulled the blanket down, his arms had seemingly been wrapped tightly around her as well, his broad shoulders arching around her small ones, holding her as if she was about to be ripped away.

She let out another cry and Mike peered down to see her face, his heart flaring with worry because all of a sudden, it was *El*. The real one. He didn't have a doubt in his mind.

El's face was screwed up in a frown, cheeks hot and rosy against her pale skin. Her mouth was hanging open slightly, soft whimpers and cries falling from her lips every few seconds, making Mike's heart

squeeze painfully.

Dropping the covers back down, Mike frantically wrapped his arm back around her, his free hand pushing through her clenched fist in order to entwine their fingers together.

She gripped onto his hand at once but her eyes remained squeezed shut, wincing as if she was in terrible pain.

“El,” he whispered frantically, his voice quiet under the sound of the pounding rain. “*El*, wake up.” Mike pressed his cheek against her hair and held her tighter, his eyes wide and his heart racing. “El, you’re having a nightmare, please, please wake up,” he said again, louder this time.

Though his voice was much more urgent, much more alert and anxious, El’s eyes remained slammed shut, her face flushed and pallid as she cried.

Mind racing frantically—looking for an answer, looking for a solution—Mike released his hold on her and let her gently fall onto her back, her head lolling onto the pillow rather than resting underneath his chin. Moving quickly to lean over her, Mike brought his hand up to cup her cheek, his face twisted with frenzied worry.

“El... *El* ! Wake up!”

His eyes were welling up but he just kept stroking her cheek, his thumb swiping away the stray tears that were slowly leaking out from under her lids.

Mike’s heart ached for her—physically ached. He could feel the weight pressing down on his chest, carving a hole in his soul. She just needed to wake up, wake up, wake—

El’s eyes shot open and her body jerked awake in a flash, her breathing rough and ragged as she gasped for air. Mike’s chest deflated in an instant, his whole being flushing with relief and his face softening as he cupped her cheeks, trying to draw her panicked gaze over to his comforting one.

“El, you’re okay, you’re safe, you’re *safe* ,” Mike said softly, his heart

squeezing as her eyes darted around, hands shaking tremendously as they came up instinctually in order to grip his.

El's gaze flitted to his face, and for a moment she just stared at him in confusion, her brows pulled together, eyes swimming with tears, threatening to spill over again. Her mouth hung open and though her chest slowed it's heaving, rough breaths still shuddered through her.

Mike gazed down softly, his thumbs still stroking along her cheeks as he leaned over her, caging her in, protecting her from everything outside their little bubble.

"You're okay," he murmured, heart racing as her chin wobbled. "We're okay."

She broke at this, face crumpling as a sob wretched itself from her throat. Mike acted automatically, dropping his arms to wrap around her waist, pulling her up against his chest.

In a flash, he flipped onto his back and let El bury her face in the crook of his neck, her arms sliding up to clasp onto the fabric of his shirt.

"...k-killed you..." She cried, her body shaking under Mike's tight hold. "I-I k-killed you."

Mike's eyes squeezed shut as she sobbed into his neck, tears wetting his skin. Keeping one arm wrapped around her back, he lifted a hand and began running his fingers through her long tresses.

"It's okay, El, it's okay. You didn't hurt anyone, it was only a dream...only a dream," he shushed, whispering softly in her ear and enveloping her in his strong embrace.

The rain continued pounding against the windows and the roof, and for a moment, Mike was taken back to their time in the cabin, when he'd held her just as he was now, except it was snow instead of rain that was storming outside.

Mike held her closer as the warm memories came back to him, smiling gently at the feel of El's heart beating against his chest, so new yet so familiar.

As he spoke to her, reassuring her that she had not hurt him or anyone, the trembling settled down and the sobbing subsided, but her breathing was still irregular and choppy.

“No one’s hurt, El, everyone’s okay...” he hummed, his fingers softly running along her scalp.

El pressed herself closer to him, if it was at all possible, and Mike sighed deeply, relishing the feeling of having her in his arms, right where she belonged. Turning his head to the side, he pressed soft kisses to her hair, mumbling sweet nothings in her ear.

“You didn’t do anything...it was just a dream...just a—”

“I’m the reason all of this happened to you,” El said suddenly, voice cracking and shaking.

Mike frowned but didn’t stop running his hand through her hair.

“What?” He asked.

All of a sudden, El pulled back, leaning on her elbow to gaze at him. Mike pouted at the loss of contact, but felt his heart crack as he saw how red and puffy her eyes were, how pained her expression was.

She was still paler than he’d have liked, but he was glad to see that some of the color had returned to her face.

“All of this. Everything. I-It’s all my fault.” She said grimly, avoiding eye contact by keeping her pained gaze locked on her hands.

At this Mike sat up, pressing his back against the bed’s headboard.

“El, what are you talking about?” He asked, forehead knitted together in confusion as he frowned at her. “Nothing’s— *nothing’s* your fault, you were just having a bad dre—”

“ *Mike* ,” she cried, her red-rimmed eyes darting up to meet his. “Look at your *wrists*. Look at your *head* . Y-You were hurt—tortured! Because of me!”

Mike watched in disbelief as El’s eyes fell to where he knew the thin

red lines still burned on the skin of his wrists. She stared at them as if they taunted her, mocked her, reminded her of everything.

“El, *you* didn’t do that. You didn’t do any of it. It’s *not* your fault,” Mike cajoled, gently trying to break her out of this toxic mindset.

“Mike!” She sobbed, swiping away frantically at the stubborn tears that began to leak out. “None of it would have happened to you if I wasn’t in your life! If I’d just stayed away, if-if I’d played it safe like Max told me to, if you’d never *met* me...then this wouldn’t have happened!”

She was fully crying now, her arms wrapping around her middle like she was barely holding the near-shattering pieces of herself together.

“If...If *I* didn’t happen to you, if *I* wasn’t in your life, you would be safe.”

Tears burned in Mike’s eyes now as well. His stomach flipping up and around because what El was saying, what she was implying was *scaring* him.

How could she *possibly* think that she was the problem when she was really the solution?

If the way she was shaking was any indication, El was seconds from crumbling.

Pushing himself off the headboard, Mike moved until he sat criss-cross right in front of her, his throat burning with cries of his own because *no* , it was completely unfair that she felt this way. Completely unfair that she was the *best* thing to ever happen to him, yet she thought she was the *worst*.

Reaching his hands out, Mike gently wrapped his fingers around her wrists, tenderly tugging them out and away from her middle.

El still wasn’t meeting his gaze, but he took it as a good sign that she let him tug her forward, pulling her arms to wrap around his chest, pressing her face against his neck.

El moved automatically, fluidly, like she was meant to all along. She

fell in his lap, one leg on either side of his waist and buried her face in his shoulder, holding onto him as if she'd completely shatter if she let go.

Mike wrapped his own arms around her as well, twisting his fingers in the back of her shirt and leaning his head down to press kiss after kiss into her hair, letting the feel of her ground him, keep him steady.

He didn't know where this was coming from, didn't know *why* she was having this strong reaction. He figured whatever happened in her nightmare had scared her, and with a sigh, he realized the events of the past few days were probably still stuck in her mind as well.

Mike knew he needed to get through to her, help her see that she was the greatest thing to happen to him, that he wouldn't trade her in for the world.

Winding his arms ever tighter around her shaking frame and cuddling her close, Mike pressed his lips to her ear, letting the words flow freely.

"If *you* didn't happen to me, El, I don't know what I would do," he said urgently, the shakiness of his voice betraying his masked confidence.

She let out a soft cry and gripped him even tighter.

"I love you so much, El. *So much* . So much that...that sometimes you'll smile or you'll laugh or you'll just *walk in the room* and I feel like I'm going to internally combust."

Mike's shoulders sagged as he let out a deep sigh, the bruising around his ribs aching slightly as he did so.

Vaguely, in the back of his mind, Mike realized that with their chests pressed together like this, their scars were probably lining up pretty accurately. For some reason, this realization felt...right. Like they were *supposed* to match. Like they were meant to happen.

Mike pressed another kiss to her hair, and he felt his whole body burn with warmth as El shivered at his touch.

"Everything that happened...I'd do all of it ten times again if it meant *you* kept happening to me," he whispered quietly, turning his head so that his cheek pressed to the crown of her head.

Mike's mind flushed anxiously as he tried envisioning a world without El in it. A world where he didn't know her, didn't feel her, a world where she was alone, far away from him.

And oddly enough, he just couldn't picture it.

Humming amusedly to himself, Mike pulled back so that he could see El's face. Cupping her cheek, he beamed down at her, his eyes alight despite her distraught expression.

El's chin wobbled and her lips drew together in a tight line, but her teary eyes stayed locked on his.

"You know...I don't think there's a universe out there where you don't happen to me," Mike said faintly, his voice low but clear.

The rain crashed against the windows—the storm raging on outside—but neither of them paid any mind. There were no threats, no danger. No, it was just them, now. Just him and her.

He reached a hand up and gently pushed her hair out of her face, whispering softly, the words just for her to hear.

"I think, no matter what, it was always supposed to be the two of us. Call it fate, or whatever, but it's you and me, El. It's always going to be you and me."

Mike rubbed his thumb under her eye, swiping away the teardrops as he softly smiled at her, positively radiating love and affection.

She looked so distraught, eyes devoid of their natural shine, face pale and lost, but he could tell she was hanging onto every word that he said, wrapped up in his confession like she was wrapped up in his arms.

"You're it, El. You're it for me."

He whispered these words with more truth and urgency than any

before. Because...it was true. As soon as he said it, he knew it was true.

She was it. She was the person he was meant to know and love and respect and hold. She was the one he wanted to tell every secret to, the one he wanted to grow up and grow old with. The one he wanted to fight with and protect and cherish for the rest of his life. She was it.

Mike watched as she took in his words, her brown eyes never leaving his dark ones for even a second. They were very close, lips only inches apart, and as they sat there, wrapped up in each other, with the rain hammering all around them, Mike felt the air change. Felt it become heavier, desperate, needy.

El seemed to sense this shift as well, for her eyes got darker, and her gaze started flitting down to his lips.

They moved on each other at the same time.

Mike swooped his lips down, catching her mouth in his own, wrapping her tighter in his arms as she pressed herself closer to his chest, as he closed his eyes and the world melted away.

Kissing El was one of Mike's favorite things in the world, hands down. The way she fit right up against him, the way she sighed and moaned against his mouth, the way she pushed closer, needing him as much as he needed her. All of it made his head spin, any and all coherent thought spinning out of control as he got lightheaded, mind filled with *her* and *only her*.

El's mouth was sweet and soft against his own, sliding open, teeth nipping at his bottom lip. She sighed heavily against his mouth as his tongue slid across her lip, silently asking for permission. Mike gripped her hips in his hands, pulling her flush against him, pressing her chest right up against his and *god*, this was most definitely his favorite thing in the *world*.

Pulling back to catch his breath, Mike gently tilted El's head up, bringing his lips down to her neck, peppering kisses along her chin, along the span of her neck, along her collarbone. He groaned as he

felt her slide her hands in his hair, tugging gently as his lips went down, down, down.

Groaning softly, he pulled the two of them down, El's head hitting the pillow so that he could lean over her, bracing an arm on either side of her head, caging her in once more.

He wasn't sure who initiated it, but all of a sudden, Mike felt his shirt being tugged up over his head. Moving quickly, he lifted a hand to pull it off before immediately bringing his lips back to El's neck.

Mike pressed soft kisses against her throat, sucking gently in a way that made her gasp against him, chest heaving. Removing one hand from his hair, Mike felt as El reached down to tug away her own shirt, twisting it up and pulling it over her head in a flash.

Mike's mind was whirring, his whole body was humming, thriving off of the feel of El's bare skin against his, the feel of her heat radiating with his.

Fuck...

He took a moment—just a moment—to stare down at her in all her shirtless glory, to revel in the fact that *holy shit* she was doing this... with *him* . He took a second to bask in his astonishment, in the captivating way her eyelashes fluttered—dazed in the same way he was.

Not missing a beat, Mike brought his lips back to the base of her neck, trailing kisses down to her heart. He was immensely pleased to find that her heart was hammering in a way that mirrored his own, beating at his ribcage, threatening to completely break through. She was gasping against him, breathless and buzzing, and Mike didn't think he needed anything else in his life ever again.

Trailing kisses back up the column of her neck, Mike slowly let his eyes roll open, pupils blown and heavy as he pulled back.

Bringing his hand up to gently cup the side of her head, Mike watched in awe and amazement as El's eyelids rolled back, her wonderstruck gaze landing on him in an instant.

Her mouth hung open slightly, lips swollen and pink. A blush painted itself across her cheeks, and Mike wondered if there was anything more beautiful in the world.

No.

No way.

He wanted more, *needed* more, and judging by the way El was gazing at him, he could tell she wanted more as well.

Leaning back down to press his lips against hers, Mike felt the finality of the two of them, felt the connection running from his heart to hers, bridging their souls together.

“Mike...” El sighed, pulling back just slightly. Reluctantly, Mike tore his lips from hers, arching up so he could see her face, falling deeper in love with every shuddering breath she took.

“Yeah?” He whispered, voice loud in their wonderful little bubble.

El blinked slowly, dazedly. Eyes glowing with happiness as she dragged her hands from his hair in order to cup both sides of his face, thumbs softly rubbing along his cheekbones.

“You’re it for me, too.”

Mike felt his heart skip a beat, pulse racing, eyes widening. A trembling breath tumbled from his lips as he gazed down at her, blown away because *fuck*, this was *it*. She was as much a goner as he was, and with a rush of love, Mike dipped his head back down, capturing her lips in a passionate kiss once more, pressing his chest against hers, savoring the way she breathed in time with him.

In the dim glow of the light, as the rain pounded against the windows, as the world faded away, they moved as one, trusting each other, knowing each other, feeling each other.

Him and her.

Just like it was always supposed to be.

As the day went on, the rain didn't let up. Crashing against the roof, storming and screaming outside. The sky remained the same clouded darkness throughout the day, but Will didn't mind. He liked it, liked how it drowned out the noise in his head.

Everyone had slept for over a day when they'd gotten back, sleep-deprived and exhausted and covered in soot. Will had shyly questioned them all once they'd gotten back, looking for El and Max but finding solace in Hopper—who had wrapped him up in an unbelievably tight hug as soon as he stepped in the door.

Will got details here and there, mostly from Lucas—the one who healed him—but he found that as he learned all that had happened, he didn't really want to know. He didn't want to know the grimy specifics, he just wanted to know if they were safe. If he was safe.

Hopper's steady hand on his shoulder told him all he needed to know.

"It's over, kid."

Despite the relief that washed over him, despite the evidence that yes, it was over and that yes, he was safe, Will couldn't help the quiet, anxious voices echoing in his head, telling him it was a lie, that it was a dream, that it wasn't real.

Nevertheless, as he rested and ate and built his strength back up, Will found that no one was coming to take him back, no one was strapping him down, no one was hurting him. On the contrary, despite the fact that he didn't know them at all—and flinched when they got too close—Will found that El and Max's friends were unconditionally kind to him.

The curly-haired one—Dustin—had asked him over a dozen times if he wanted anything to eat, claiming that he was a 'master chef' that could cook just about anything.

Sitting in the kitchen, trying to figure out how to politely decline, it was at this point that the healer—Lucas—jumped in and started

arguing against Dustin's proud declaration, contending that *no* , in fact *he* was the master chef, and that he was tired of Dustin taking all his credit.

This had launched them into quite the spat, and as Will sat frozen at the table, his frantic eyes darted between the two, nervously wondering if it was up to him to stop their bickering, and if he'd have the courage to do so.

But he didn't have to worry very long, for not a moment later, Max wandered into the kitchen, and Will instantly felt his nerves die back down.

Max. Good. Safe.

"What are these two dweebs fighting about now?" She asked, sliding into the seat next to him and leaning an elbow onto the table, resting her head in her palm.

"S-Something about which one of them is the 'master chef', I-I don't know what—" Will started, whispering in fear that they'd overhear him and get angry at him. But Max was two steps ahead of him.

"Oh *god* , not this 'master chef' nonsense again," she groaned, running a hand through her long, red hair. Will noticed it was wet, so he guessed that she'd just taken a shower.

"Let me handle this one," she sighed, rolling her eyes.

His breath hitching in his throat, Will watched anxiously as Max pulled herself up out of her chair, striding over to push herself between the two boys. Placing a hand on each of their chests, she physically pushed them apart, keeping them at arm's length.

"Both of you, *shut up* and stop being babies about this," she barked, glaring at either one of them. Though Max was a head shorter than both of them, her commanding presence made her appear ten feet tall, and for that, Will was grateful. He didn't think he'd *ever* be able to take control like *that* .

Dustin and Lucas paused, staring at her like they'd just noticed she was there, but then immediately launched back into their arguments,

talking over one another until they were nearly yelling.

“You can’t cook for shit! It’s always me!”

“You *bake* , that’s VERY different!”

“Using ingredients to make food! Same thing!”

“WRONG! AGAIN!”

Will flinched at Dustin’s raised tone, his heart racing and eyes widening. Out of instinct, he gripped the edge of his chair, ready to run if he needed to.

Max, sensing none of this, pushed harder against the two boys.

“HEY, MASTER CHEFS!” She bellowed over the two of them, her voice riddled with sarcasm.

Will watched anxiously as Dustin and Lucas paused, huffing at one another.

“Guess what? You BOTH can’t cook for shit! Honestly, it’s a *miracle* you haven’t given anybody food poisoning at the coffee shop yet!”

His knuckles turning white from the iron-tight grip he had on the chair, Will tried to calm his rapid heart rate. He didn’t like fighting. He didn’t like arguing. He didn’t like any of it. Didn’t like the aggression. Didn’t like the anger. It only led to hurt.

Staring at the three of them wide-eyed, Will tried to gauge whether or not it would be socially appropriate for him to just...get up and leave.

None of them seemed to realize how loud they’d become, for now Dustin and Lucas turned to face Max, hurt expressions painting their faces.

“Well...that’s food poisoning that YOU’D get!” Dustin argued, reaching forward to poke Max on the shoulder.

Lucas nodded, crossing his arms over his chest. “Yeah, you eat our

food at the shop like, ten times a week!”

Max scoffed, putting her hands on her hips and staring between the two of them, an eyebrow raised dangerously.

“Yeah because you guys always forget to make me pay!” She insisted, the ghost of a smile itching onto her face.

This seemed to send Dustin and Lucas into a tizzy, for as soon as the words left her mouth they were up in arms again, squabbling about how, “Nooooo, we do that to be nice!” and “Fine, if you feel that way, you owe us about sixty bucks in scones!”

After a few minutes, Will was sure they’d forgotten about him completely. Deciding to take his shot, he quietly started to push himself out of the chair, trying to get out of the kitchen as unnoticed as possible.

His plan was thwarted, however, as two pairs of footsteps started echoing through the hall.

“What the hell is going on in here?” An unfamiliar voice rang out.

Will instantly settled back in his seat, unsure if it was up to him to answer. The footsteps drew nearer and Will watched as El emerged through the kitchen door, her arm wrapped around a tall, dark haired stranger, holding him up like he would collapse if she let go. Or maybe she was holding him in fear she would collapse, Will couldn’t be sure.

Her eyes locked on his, confusion written all across her features, but then her gaze flitted over to where Max, Dustin, and Lucas stood arguing, and recognition dawned on her.

She said something to the stranger, pulling him down a bit so she could whisper in his ear, before guiding the two of them to the kitchen table.

Will watched the stranger carefully, studying his movements. He limped a bit on his left side, and he winced as he sat down in the chair across from Will, evidently in some level of pain.

Oh, that must be Mike.

“Hey Will,” El said, sitting in the seat that Max had previously occupied and drawing his attention back. She reached out and held his hand in hers, releasing it from its ironclad grip on the chair. “What are they fighting about this time?”

Will was glad to hear her voice, glad to see her in person. He’d briefly seen both her and the stra— *Mike* , come in the day before, but didn’t have a chance to stop and chat.

“Uh, um, I don’t...” Will started, suddenly nervous to have attention on him, but El just gazed at him, her eyes as kind as ever, waiting for him to finish. “S-Something about who the best...who the best cook is, I think...”

El rolled her eyes, and for a split second, Will thought he may be mad at him, but then she just turned to...to Mike and gave him a small smile. He grinned back at her, his shoulders heaving as he moved to stand up, brushing his hand against the back of her neck as he passed her.

Will watched this interaction with rapt fascination. As long as he’d known El, she’d *hated* being touched. Hated the feeling of *anyone’s* hands on her, even him and Max. But now, with Mike, she seemed to not only be okay with it, she seemed to *lean* into his touch, seemed to relish in the feeling of his hands on her.

Hmm..interesting.

“Mike’s the only one that can *really* cook,” El’s voice suddenly spoke in his ear. Will jumped a bit, startled to be broken out of his thoughts so abruptly. “He learned from his mom. Had to cook dinners and stuff for his baby sister after their dad left.”

She said it earnestly, like it was the most sacred piece of information she possessed. Will just nodded back, gaze darting from her to the now-quieter group. Mike seemed to be calming them all down, making points about how all of them could cook on some level, and about how Max didn’t owe them anything. Mike had the same commanding presence as Max, but he seemed to be using it to lead

rather than to boss them around.

“Sorry about them,” El started saying again, squeezing Will’s hand lightly. He turned to look at her again. “It takes some getting used to, but that’s kind of just what they’re like. You...you learn to love it.”

Will laughed softly, and he watched as some of El’s own trepidation melted away, her face relaxing.

“How’re you feeling, Will?” She asked, and he watched as she performed a visual inspection of him, eyeing him up and down as if she’d be able to tell from his body language alone.

“Better. Well, not *better* , but better,” he confessed, confusing even himself. El seemed to get what he was saying, though, for the corners of her mouth turned up and she squeezed his hand again.

“Good. Where’s Hopper? Still sleeping?”

Will shook his head, “No. He went with uh, with Steve to the police station. I think they’re...y’know... *dealing* with everything.”

El’s eyes widened and her mouth dropped open and closed again, surprise painted on her face.

Before either one of them could respond, however, the front door opened, and the very two people they were speaking of walked in.

Hopper and Steve seemed to be in deep discussion as they strode in, shaking off their rain-covered coats and hanging them on the hook by the door. Will watched with trepidation, the question he’d been thinking about for days now suddenly pushing itself to the tip of his tongue.

Hopper caught his gaze but continued speaking in a low voice to Steve, whose arms were crossed over his chest defensively.

After a few minutes of focusing his hearing to try and listen to what the two of them were saying, Will realized that the kitchen had gone completely silent, every single pair of eyes on Hopper, waiting for directions, waiting for instructions.

Mike had moved to stand behind El, his hand gently placed on her shoulder, her hand coming up to clasp onto his. Max and Lucas were also standing closer now, all arguments and fighting ceasing completely as they all stared at Hopper.

He seemed to notice them, but paid no mind, instead finishing up his low discussion with Steve.

“And you can hold onto ‘em until we can figure it all out?” Hopper asked, hands on his hips.

“Yeah, I got enough room, should be fine,” Steve answered, nodding along.

Hopper seemed pleased with this, as he clapped a hand over Steve’s shoulder, patting him a few times in what appeared to be gratitude.

Will watched earnestly, waiting patiently for Hopper to come to him so that he could ask, so that he could *find out* .

Finally turning to face them all, Hopper strode into the kitchen, leaning against the doorframe, clearly aware that they were all waiting for him.

“Alright,” he started, voice gruff but strong. They all stared up at him, hanging onto every word. “It’s gonna take some time to deal with all of this. The flash drive is in the right hands, though. It’ll be dealt with *very* carefully, I can promise you that.”

Will watched out of the corner of his eye as El nodded appreciatively, squeezing Mike’s hand tighter.

“The fire burned the bottom three floors, but emergency crews were able to put it down before the whole place went up. Good thing too, no *innocent* lives were taken.”

Will’s eyebrows knitted together in confusion as Hopper’s words turned icy. But a scoff from behind him made it clear that that might’ve been directed at Max.

“Twelve other kids were rescued from the building. Twelve other kids...like *you* ,” Hopper went on, eyeing Will, Max, and El. The air

in the room went cold and Will felt his entire body freeze up, his insides lurching at the thought of all those other *subjects*.

“They’re all in protective services now. But they’re safe.” Will saw El clap a hand over her mouth from the spot next to him, and he wondered if she was crying.

“There’s going to be a large-scale investigation diving into all this shit, and even though I’ll be involved, and Steve will be involved, all of your names will be left off the table. And unless you choose to come forward with your stories, you won’t have to deal with any of this ever again.”

The silence piercing the room was deafening, and Will could tell that all of their minds were churning, taking Hopper’s words to heart.

“Nevertheless,” he went on, running a tired hand over his face. “I want all of you to stay with Steve until this blows over. He has *very kindly* offered to house all of you until—”

“Woah, woah, woah, we aren’t staying *here* !” Dustin interjected, looking scandalized. “No offense, Steve, but we all have lives to get back to! I-I’ve got a test next week!”

“Yeah, and my car has been in the thirty minute parking lot for like... a couple of days now...” Lucas said slowly. “I *really* gotta deal with that.”

The two of them broke into squabbles, talking over one another, professing their concerns with Hopper’s proposed arrangement. This led to Mike and Max butting in as well, trying to get them to *shut up and listen* . It was no use though, for confused chaos starting taking over the small kitchen.

Will didn’t listen to any of this, though, his eyes were still trained on Hopper, begging with his fervent gaze, trying to relay the question he *needed* the answer to.

But Hopper was now rubbing his eyes tiredly, and even though it had been seven years, Will knew *that* meant he was losing his patience quickly.

Deciding to just *go for it* and take the leap, Will gathered his courage, his heart hammering all the while.

Dropping El's hand, Will slowly pushed himself up out of the chair, weakly rising to his full height and staring Hopper down. The room fell silent as he did so, and Will felt a lurch of nerves pool in his stomach. He *hated* being the center of attention. But he needed to know.

Hopper brought his gaze up as the noise died down, his eyes meeting Will's instantly.

"When can I see her?" He asked finally, voice stronger than he felt.

All eyes were on him, but Will didn't let his confidence waver. Letting out a deep sigh, Will watched apprehensively as Hopper slowly walked towards him, gently putting a hand on either one of his shoulders.

"Today, kid. You can see her today."

As it turned out, El and Max had a *big* problem with even the idea of being separated from Will. And understandably so, after all this time, they were completely justified in their opposition to Hopper's initial plan. That mixed with the gradual realization that none of them could just *camp out* in Steve's house until it all blew over led to another argument about *what to do now*.

It took a few stress-fueled discussions, but eventually the group came to the conclusion that Max, El, and Mike would all stay in Dustin's cabin for a few more days, or at least until they had a better grasp on the situation.

That way, as El pointed out, Will could stay with his family and still be close enough to them, seeing as Hopper and Will's mom coincidentally *lived* in the same town where the cabin was. This plan would also benefit Mike—he could recover and get his strength back without needing to worry about life back home.

Dustin and Lucas, however, *would* head back home in order to deal

with everything that was most probably falling apart in their school and work lives. And though the refused to accept any apologies from El, Max, or Will, they promised to stay safe and make sure everything would be covered.

As soon as the plan was set, they packed up their things, cleaned up the house, and all of a sudden, they were saying goodbye to Steve, who looked genuinely saddened to see them all go, despite the fact they'd burst into his home and completely wrecked it within a matter of hours.

Dustin and Lucas departed first, borrowing Steve's car until they could get Lucas's back. With his nerves spiking through the roof, Will said his goodbyes, thanking them for helping to rescue him. They were modest in their replies, but Will could tell they were glad to see him safe.

Will promised to himself that one day, when he got his courage up, he would thank them, *really* thank all of them. He didn't know how, but he swore to himself to show them how grateful he was.

It wouldn't be now, though. No, now Will had to face the one thing that both scared and excited him more than anything.

His mom.

The drive up took a little while, but Will hardly noticed any time go by at all. For the entire trip, he sat squashed up in the front seat between Max and the window, alternating between staring at his shaking hands and staring out at the stormy weather.

El checked in with him progressively from the backseat with Mike, but Will couldn't bring himself to say anything, too lost in his thoughts.

He'd dreamed about seeing his mom again for years, literal *years*. He'd thought about what he would say, what she would say, how they'd both react. Day in and day out he would fantasize about hugging her one last time, telling her he loved her and he missed her. But it had always been just that—a dream. Just some faraway hope that maybe one day he'd be able to see her again.

Now, all of a sudden, it was happening.

Hopper pulled the truck up to the front of the house, the rain having turned to snow a half-hour back.

It looked just like he remembered it. Wrap-around porch covered in snow, dim lights illuminating the living room inside. Slowly, Will peered out the windshield and gazed up, catching sight of his old bedroom window, the one that sat facing out the second story of the house. He gulped and wondered if they'd changed his room at all in his absence.

Probably. It's been seven years.

"You ready, kid?" Hopper asked, breaking Will out of his thoughts. He flinched in surprise but got over it quickly, peering over Max to look at his stepfather.

"N-No," he said quietly. "But I don't think I'll ever be ready, so we might as well go."

Hopper nodded with tight lips before cutting the engine. The heater stopped as he did so, and all of a sudden, it was *freezing*.

"Well *shit*," Max swore. "Let's get inside before our balls freeze off, shall we?"

It was just the right level of ridiculousness to lighten the mood, and with an appreciative smile, Will silently thanked her for breaking the tension.

The five of them piled out of the truck, shivering as they trudged through the snow up to the front porch. Hopper was the only one with a thick enough jacket, and as Max helped Will up the stairs, he realized, *shit* she was right.

Hopper opened the front door quickly, allowing them all to hustle in as fast and as quietly as possible.

As soon as Will crossed the threshold, he was overcome by a sudden sense of *home*.

It was like no time had passed at all.

Everything was exactly as he remembered, every piece of furniture, every picture frame, every decoration, every lamp, all of it was just like before. Will could even swear that if he used his powers and pulled up the image of his house seven years ago, it would match up exactly.

It *smelled* like home too. He didn't know what it was, couldn't quite put his finger on it, but instinctually, Will felt calmer, more at ease. His aching shoulders relaxed and he let out a deep sigh, closing his eyes and breathing in the familiar air.

The tranquil moment was broken, however, as a soft voice echoed through the house.

“Jim? Is that you?”

Will's stomach dropped.

His body flushed ice cold.

His heart began racing and his eyes started darting around wildly because he *knew* that voice and oh *god* this was it. This was it and he wasn't ready and he couldn't do it and he didn't know how long he'd be able to—

And then there she was.

Turning around the corner with a curious look painted on her face, Joyce Byers came into the light.

She looked the same, yet so, *so* different. Her eyes were tired, sunken deeper in her head, and there were *dark* purple bags circling under each one. Her hair was shorter, cropped to her shoulders as compared to the long style that she had before. She looked *tired*, tired and lost and exhausted, and Will felt a lurch of guilt rush through him.

He froze on the spot as she walked down the long hallway, clearly confused as to why there were so many people in the house that she couldn't recognize in the dark lighting.

“Jim?” She said again, and Will felt his breath hitch in his throat. He was paralyzed completely, unable to move, unable to breathe.

“Jim, where have you *been* ? Who did...who did you bring with yo—”

But all of a sudden, she stopped, foot freezing midstep. Will hadn’t noticed it when it happened, but someone had turned on the hall light, illuminating the room.

And all of a sudden, she was looking at him.

His head was spinning and his throat was burning but he *couldn’t move* , he couldn’t say *anything* because she was *looking* right at him, staring at him, eyes as wide as could be, mouth gaping open.

Will knew that he ought to do something, but he just couldn’t muster up the energy, not with the way his pulse raced and his head swam, threatening to make him pass out completely.

Will could sense movement around him, and vaguely he felt Max let go of his arm, leaving him to support himself rather than with her help, but he paid no mind, just let his eyes rake over her face, memorizing this moment in case it was another trick.

Neither of them moved an inch, just stared at each other, breathless.

Then, finally, his mom took a small step forward, her hands heavily shaking and mouth gaping open and closed, astonished.

Joyce crept closer and closer to him, each step feeling like a mile, and as she neared where he stood frozen, Will could see that her eyes were clouded with tears.

“*W-Will?*” She breathed, voice barely above a whisper, dark eyes locked on his. Her eyebrows were pulled together in confusion and disbelief, but she didn’t pull her gaze off of him for a *second*.

Will felt all the blood drain from his head down to his feet. Blinking dazedly at the sound of his name falling from her lips, Will felt his chest ache and burn.

In the back of his mind, he tried to think of what he’d rehearsed,

what he'd dreamed of saying, but now that she was stood *right* in front of him, he was speechless.

Inhaling deeply, Will felt oxygen rush back into his system, felt his confidence begin to grow. A hot, wet teardrop slid down his cheek, and vaguely Will wondered when he'd started crying.

Mustering up his courage, wringing his hands together nervously, Will shut his eyes and opened his mouth to speak. But before any words could come out, he felt a soft, gentle hand caressing his face, wiping away the tears that were sliding down his cheeks.

"Will?" She said again, and this time, he couldn't hold it back.

With a sob, Will collapsed in her arms, slamming his eyes shut and pressing his face to her neck, letting his pain and worry and guilt fall out. She responded immediately, wrapping her trembling arms around his back and pulling him as close as possible, her own shoulders shaking with rough cries as she held him.

"I'm sorry!" He cried, voice shaking with sobs. "I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry! I-I'm s-so *sorry* !"

Will didn't know where the words were coming from, but he knew they were right. Because he was sorry. He was sorry for vanishing and for being so mean to her on that last day of school and for being who he *was* and for having the power that led to this whole mess.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm—"

"Will," Joyce breathed in his ear, her whispered words cracking through his manic mantra. "Oh *my boy* , *my boy* , you're safe, y-you're *alive*. "

She pulled her arms tighter around his back and even though he hurt and ached and probably *needed* to sit down, he didn't protest, only gripped her tighter and sobbed harder, his frantic apologies dying out into soft whimpers.

"I'm sorry...I'm sorry..."

Joyce pulled back a little bit, moving her hand to cup his cheek, and

though Will could feel her gaze burning through him, he couldn't bring himself to look her in the eye, suddenly overwhelmed with shame.

"Will, baby, look at me," she cajoled softly, rubbing her thumb across his cheeks. He whimpered at the soft touch. "*Look* at me."

His chest heaved with shuddering breaths, and though he didn't think it would be physically possible for him to do so, Will surprised himself and slowly opened his teary eyes, his shameful gaze meeting her loving one.

"There's *nothing* to be sorry for, *nothing* at all," She said urgently, gently holding his face in a way that only his mother could.

Her words felt so strong and true, and her eyes were so caring and warm, but Will knew it wasn't true. There was *plenty* to be sorry for.

"Baby, look at me," she whispered, softly stroking his short hair, her eyes clouded with love and longing. "God, look how big you've grown," she said wistfully, like she was reminiscing of a life she never had. Not to be deterred, she went on, keeping her eyes locked on his.

"Baby, I love you so much. Listen to me, there is *nothing* to be sorry for."

He knew it wasn't true. Knew that he would spend the rest of his life apologizing, but for now, Will was okay with just letting her hold him, letting her tell him that everything was okay, letting himself fall apart in her arms in a way that you could only do with a mother.

Bursting with another hiccuping cry, Will fell against her shoulder again, pressing his face to her neck, relishing how overwhelmed he became with that feeling of *home* as she whispered in his ear.

Notes for the Chapter:

MY BOY

Thank you, thank you, thank you to every single person who comments or shares or spreads this fic around. I've worked really hard on it and I feel so

grateful that so many of you like it. I've got love rushes for all of you.

Let me know what you think of this chapter. I wasn't planning on making it so long, but things take time, y'know.

Thank you, thank you, thank you!

-AJ

P.S. Come hang with me @janes-mike.tumblr.com if you want to.

P.P.S. I added chapter names! Look at me go! Productive!

26. Next Great Adventure

Notes for the Chapter:

I have plenty of excuses, but I won't bore you with them. Enjoy!

"It's just like he always showed us," El said quietly, peering around the quaint living room. Warm, plush couches in every corner, ring stains on the well-loved coffee table, family photos lining the walls. Whispers of lost holidays and uncelebrated birthdays and abandoned family movie nights sat at the front of El's mind, constricting the small room and draining the air, making it feel empty and anguished.

"I know, kinda trippy don't you think? Like, I've been here before, but I've never *been* here before," Max replied as she teetered by the door frame, hesitant to go any further. Her teeth still chattered from the cold outside.

El hummed in agreement and, with a small nod of her head, met Max's gaze, a tidal wave of unspoken words passing through them (as they often did).

El sighed, keeping the arm she had wrapped around Mike's waist secure as they slowly moved about Will's childhood home. Mike stood leaning against her, trying (and failing) to hide how much pain he was clearly in.

"Hey," El prodded, gazing up at him with concern. "You alright?"

At her words, Mike slowly brought his gaze down to meet hers, tearing his eyes away from a trophy with a monogrammed inscription that El couldn't read from her spot. She could see he'd gotten paler since they left Steve's house, and it didn't escape her how his weight against her had grown heavier the longer they'd been standing.

Following Will's emotional reunion with his mother, the three of them had quietly drifted to the living room, hoping to give Will and his family a few private moments together before life rushed back in on them. Faint whispers and ghosts of exclamations could be heard

drifting through the house, but El was trying her very best to give Will, Joyce, and Hopper the time they needed to stop and settle into this new reality. The reality where all of a sudden Will was alive after being dead for so long.

“Yeah, I’m okay. I’m alright. But maybe, can we sit down?” Mike said, answering her question. He gazed longingly over at the couch, but his eyes held a trepidation that El was sure had been drilled into him by his “*manners matter!*” mother.

“Yeah, c’mon,” El said, supporting his weight as they trudged over to the couch.

Gripping both of his arms, El helped Mike lower down to the couch, his body sinking into the pillows with a *whoosh* that told El the couch was extremely worn-in. Mike settled his head back against the cushions with a deep sigh, his hand slowly rising to gently prod at the scar lining the side of his head. El settled down next to him, one leg tucked under the other in an attempt to warm her legs.

“Better?” She asked, studying his pallid skin concernedly. Mike breathed in and out through his nose slowly, his eyes closing and opening again.

“Yeah, much.” He paused looking beyond El and out into the hallway leading to the kitchen. “How do you think they’re doing? Or I guess, how do you think Will’s mom is doing?”

Mike’s words came out with the intent of genuine curiosity, but El could detect the constrict tightness laced between them that told her he was distracting himself from more pain than he was letting on. Nevertheless, she sighed and wrapped her fingers around his hand.

“I think she’s doing as well as can be expected. It’s going to be an adjustment for sure, but Will’s home, and I don’t think anything is more important than that.”

Mike nodded sullenly, his eyebrows furrowing in the same cute way they always did when he was thinking really hard. El felt her heart twinge fondly.

“You kids doin’ alright in here?” This was Hopper’s deep voice, echoing down the hallway as he drew closer to the living room. A moment later, he clamored into the door frame, shirt untucked and exhausted hand running through his beard. Max jumped at his sudden appearance, but otherwise maintained her typical neutral half-glare.

“Yep, doing fine,” El answered. Then, after a pregnant pause: “How’s Joyce?”

The corners of Hoppers lips tilted up just slightly, his eyes growing faintly warmer. “She’s...I think she’s still in shock a bit. Can’t stop crying and won’t take her hand out of his for even a second.”

El piqued an eyebrow. “Why are you smiling then?”

Hopper let out a bark of a laugh, short but filled with relief. “‘Cuz I know she knows it’s real. Gave me quite the earful the second you all left about how I should’ve called her the minute I knew he was alive.”

El grinned, her eyes dropping to where her hands wrapped around Mike’s. She knew what Joyce was feeling. If someone had known Mike was okay back when he was trapped and had failed to let her know...she would’ve lost her mind.

“Can we see him?” Max asked, breaking the soft quiet that had fallen between them.

Hopper nodded, motioning with his hand for them to follow behind him. Max turned to El with a raised brow, silently asking if she needed any help. El smiled and shook her head minutely, squeezing Mike’s hand in hers. Max, catching the message, trailed behind Hopper’s thundering footsteps towards the kitchen.

“We’ll head to the cabin soon,” El said as she pulled Mike to his feet, her heart dropping as he wobbled a bit as he stood. “Give you some time to rest and get your strength back.”

Mike nodded, his eyes shut as he swayed under her grip. Opening them, he looked down and took in her concerned expression.

"I'm fine, promise. Just a little dizzy is all," he said, voice betraying him as it shook.

"Mhmm," El hummed, her heart sinking as once again, Mike downplayed how he was feeling. Instead of arguing, though, she simply wiggled underneath his arm, wrapping her own around his side.

Together they ventured into the kitchen, taking it slow and working as a team.

El's eyes danced across the kitchen—warm, yellow backsplash, marble tile—to the breakfast nook in the corner, where Will and Joyce were sitting.

Hopper wasn't kidding, Joyce was *really* holding onto Will's hand as if he'd break off and fade away any second. El could see how her knuckles had gone white from holding on, but if Will had any problem with it, he wasn't saying anything.

The two were in deep conversation, murmuring low enough that El could only make out the edges of words. As she and Mike moved in through the doorway, however, El caught sight of Joyce letting go of one of Will's hands and slowly moving her gaze down to his abdomen. Will took her hand in his own—gently this time—and gingerly brought it down to his ribcage. She touched it softly, her fingers running along the spot where El *knew* the bullet was still lodged. Her heart sunk and she felt the weight of all the years lost press down on her shoulders. She held Mike tighter.

"Will?"

It was Max, watching this interaction with no doubt the same guilt as El, judging from the gloomy frown pulling at the corners of her mouth. Will and Joyce snapped their gazes up, both a bit startled.

"How do you feel? You're getting kinda pale."

At Max's words, some unspoken rule had been broken, ejecting them all from the hazy bubble they'd been floating in and back into the real world.

El watched Joyce carefully, studying how her gaze snapped back to Will, the hand on his ribcage jumping up to cup his cheek softly, her mouth dropping open.

“Oh baby, you *are* . Let me get you some water, fix you something to eat,” she said, clamoring out of her chair and over to the kitchen.

At this, both Will and Hopper groaned, their eyes rolling shut.

El’s eyebrows pulled together. “What?” She asked, her eyes jumping from Hopper to Will inquisitively.

Hopper sidled over to El and Mike, guiding them gently to the kitchen table, where Max had taken up Joyce’s vacant seat. “Joyce’s cooking isn’t always a *good* thing necessarily,” he muttered lowly.

Mike chuckled against El’s side, gratefully sliding into the chair across from Will. El moved to sit next to him, but caught herself quickly as she spotted Joyce’s shaking hands grabbing at plates and bowls from the cupboards overhead.

She bent down and kissed Mike’s cheek softly. “I’m going to help Joyce. Are you okay here?”

He nodded, turning so that his eyes could catch hers. He was tired, she could tell. Rings growing darker, eyelids drooping slightly. Nevertheless, he gave her a small smile and leaned up a bit so that she could drop her lips down to his for a small kiss.

Joyce had pulled out nearly everything in the refrigerator by the time El came up to her side. Deli meats, cheeses, vegetables, boxed goods, anything and everything splayed across the tile haphazardly.

“Hey,” El said softly, “is there anything I can help you with?”

Joyce paused and looked over, her hands still grabbing at two pieces of bread, continuing their actions even though her focus had shifted. El smiled hesitantly, suddenly all too aware that this was the first time she was *really* meeting Will’s mom.

Would she be mad that Will had remained trapped and imprisoned while El gone off with Max, intent on living a normal life? She bit her

lip and waited for a response, studying Joyce's expression as it changed from hurried and frantic to soft and tender.

Joyce dropped the bread and moved in on El before she even knew what was happening. In an instant, El felt her whole body being squeezed in a hug with strength that was suspiciously solid for a woman of Joyce's size. El froze, eyes flashing uncomfortably until—

“Thank you for bringing him back to me.”

Tears welled in her eyes as she stood there, stock still in Joyce's embrace. It was different than Mike's hugs, less protective warmth and more frantic joy, but it was comforting nonetheless. El stood motionless for a beat more, soaking in the feeling, living in the words before she lifted her arms and wrapped them around Joyce, returning the hug.

“I'm so sorry it took so long. I-I'm sorry we couldn't save him earlier,” El said softly, the words only for Joyce to hear.

But Joyce just gave her another squeeze, a silent assurance that all was well, that she wasn't upset or angry, she was just happy to have Will back. El felt her shoulders slump just the smallest amount. *Free* .

They pulled apart at the same time, both slyly trying to hide the small tears that had formed in their eyes. They laughed softly.

El lifted a hand to brush the hair out of her eyes, her gaze moving back down to the bread sitting on the counter. But before she could make any moves to start making food, Joyce spoke again.

“H-Have I seen you before?” She asked, and El only noticed once she looked over that Joyce was staring at El perplexedly, her eyebrows narrowed and lips pursed as she tried to place El's face.

El frowned, her hand lifting to nervously push a strand of hair behind her ear. “Um, I don't...I don't think...” her gaze naturally drifted to Mike, who was conversing softly with Max and Will at the table. He was turned away from her, but she could see the scar resting beneath his dark hair, his ear poking out beneath the scruff in a way that was far too cute to be allowed.

Oh.

A soft blush crept up her cheeks.

“You know what,” she said, turning back to the bread, face red, “you *have* seen me before. And Mike actually. You uh, you ran into us in town like a week or so ago.” She looked up through her eyelashes and glanced at Joyce, who—despite her obvious confusion—had quietly begun to grab things from the refrigerator to help make sandwiches. “Outside the general store. You...you kind of ran into us during a...” El frowned, she didn’t know how to say exactly *what* that night had been. “A...declaration of love,” she laughed, her heart warming fondly at the memory.

Joyce stopped for a beat, glancing at El out of the corner of her eye. A small smile tugged on her lips. “Oh yes , I do remember that,” she grinned, grabbing a knife. “Thought you were just a couple of teenagers or something.” She spread some jam across the bread, a small smile overtaking her face. They worked quietly for a moment, side by side. “A declaration of *love* huh?”

El sighed, looking over at Mike again. She expected him to be busy, but this time he wasn’t in conversation. No, this time he was gazing right back at her, his eyes soft and fond and home. El’s stomach flipped and her cheeks warmed.

“Yeah,” she said softly. “Love.”

“Are you sure you’ve got everything?” Max asked, brushing her long hair behind her shoulder as she dropped the last bag out from the back of the car trunk and into El’s open hand.

“ Yes , Max, it’s only for a few days,” El said, grasping the bag’s handle with a lug. “A week, tops.”

The two of them were standing outside the cabin, a chill crawling up their spines as they unloaded bags and groceries from the car. Hopper had driven them, and was now helping Mike inside as he still wasn’t strong enough to walk entirely on his own. Max shut the trunk with a

slam and pulled her jacket tighter around her shoulders, her feet shifting in the snow.

It was odd, despite how much El had learned about the world since their escape, she still couldn't quite fathom the abrupt changes in weather.

"And you have the burner phone?" Max questioned again, nodding to El's pocket. "I altered it so that I can track you from Will's house in case anything happens, and *really* I can set up some security cameras around this place," she rambled, eyes wild, "I *really* don't think Dustin would mind considering he wouldn't have to pay any electricity bills for it because obviously *I'd* be the electricity, and that way I would *know* you would both be safe and—"

"Max!" El laughed, cutting off the redhead. She dropped the bag and placed both hands on Max's shoulders. "We'll be okay. It's only for a few days."

After they'd eaten and calmed down a bit after the reunion, the four of them had left to get some supplies and head up to the cabin, where El and Mike would be staying while he recovered *and* while the fallout from the lab settled down. Max had initially planned on staying with them as well, but decided to stick with Will while he readjusted to life back in the real world.

"I'll call you if there are any problems at all," El said smiling. "In fact, I'll call you every day *even* if there are no problems."

Max chewed her bottom lip, obviously nervous about the prospect of being apart from El after over five years together. She reached up and pulled El's hands off her shoulders, holding them in her own, still chewing her lip. "Fine. Give me updates about how Mike's doing, and I'll keep you posted on Will, too."

El nodded sincerely, glad that she didn't even need to ask. She squeezed Max's hands and gave her a small smile. It was odd, standing there with her, sharing temporary goodbyes with the person whom she relied on and trusted for so long. A sort of melodic nostalgia crept in, reminding El that while they were at the end of one thing, they were at the beginning of something brand new.

She glanced up at the cabin, dim lights illuminating the frosty windows, smoke beginning to billow out of the chimney. Mike was in there, waiting for her. Her heart flushed warm.

El turned back towards Max. “Hey, Max,” she said, their eyes meeting. Her shoulders slumped a bit, and all of a sudden she felt everything from the past years bubbling to the surface. Her voice was hoarse and came out scratchy. “Thank you.”

Max blinked, and for a moment El could have sworn she saw the faintest hint of tears, but the redhead looked away before she could tell for sure. Max didn’t say anything more, just nodded quietly, the corners of her lips curling up just so.

There was too much to say, too much to be grateful for, too much to be sorry for. Just...too much. Their eyes locked for a beat more, an ocean of love and hurt and wonder passing between them. Then softly and with a grace El knew all too well, Max turned and walked back to the truck.

El watched her go, her heart swelling and contracting with the sensation that something in her life had just finished. Not *ended*, no, nothing hard nor permanent. Something had just...finished. Something had softly concluded, the last page turned and the book put down.

She was onto something more, now. More life, more sadness, more joy.

Or maybe, *someone* more.

El took a deep breath, her shoulders rising and falling and her sigh coming out as translucent puffs of chill in the snowy air. She looked up through her eyelashes at the cabin’s face, freshly powdered snow settling down on the roof slats in quiet blankets. Her life was in there, waiting for her. All she had to do was walk inside.

El closed her eyes and took a moment—just one—to let herself feel everything. To feel her fear, her longing, her anxiety. To feel her joy and love and relief. To feel everything that had led up to the moment, and to feel everything that would happen afterwards.

It all slipped through her mind with ease, flowing softly like fingers down a silk scarf.

She opened her eyes. The chill of the air bit at the tip of her nose and the tops of her ears, urging her to go inside and get warm. El brought up a hand and gently pushed her hair over her ears, still gazing up at the house.

The cabin face was warm and inviting, and before the thought even formed in her head, she was rushing forward, eager to get inside.

“Honestly I don’t think any of you are the *master chefs* you say you are. I’m surprised you haven’t sent anyone to the hospital.” El laughed, scooping soup up with the ladle and bringing it carefully to the bowls laid out on the counter.

“Yet!” Mike called from the couch, his head lopsided and hanging off at a strange angle so that he could see her.

El laughed, her stomach swirling with fondness at his bright attitude despite everything from the past week.

“Goof,” she whispered to herself with a grin, sliding two spoons into the bowls. She glided over, her socked feet slipping easily from the tile floor of the kitchen to the cozy carpet of the living room. Mike grinned as she got closer, his long limbs draping over the edge of the couch.

“Here, sit up,” she said balancing soup bowls. “But be careful, it’s hot.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he smiled, taking the bowl and sitting up slowly. He moved with delicacy, and the wince that took over his face didn’t escape El’s notice as she slid in next to him, her body instantly gravitating towards his.

The cabin was warm, heated by the glow of the fire and the space heaters they’d dug out from the closet. Snow was gently falling outside; a thin layer blanketing onto the trees and roof above them. All of their belongings had been dropped in the bedroom—Hopper

having helped them get settled before leaving with Max to get home to Will and Joyce—but the two of them had settled on snuggling up on the couch, doused in big blankets. El appreciated Hopper's help, she really did. She appreciated everything *all* of them had done in the past week, way beyond these menial tasks.

El sighed quietly, sipping her soup and enjoying the peaceful silence that had fallen in the room. Only the sound of the TV could be heard, playing some old Christmas rerun that El had never seen before. A younger couple in big, warm coats were standing in a square, their heads bowed to one another. Lights strung around the town, illuminating their faces as they gazed at one another, love in their eyes. Soft music was playing in the background as the girl on the screen moved forward, gently leading her partner in a slow, tender dance. She'd never seen this movie before, but they were in love, she could tell.

"What is this?" She asked without taking her eyes off the screen, her head tilting in perplexion.

Strands of hair were falling out of her low bun, obscuring her vision, and as she shook them out of her face she caught sight of Mike staring at her. Not staring *staring*, more like gazing, warm and kind. His eyes were soft, his cheeks were bright, and the corners of his lips were twitching up just enough that the shadow of a smile was peeking out.

El turned, smiling. "What?"

He didn't answer, just grinned; his hair falling over his forehead, his gaze relaxed and gentle.

"What?"

Mike leaned forward, taking hold of her soup bowl in the hand that was not holding his own and placing both on the coffee table. He then stood up—moving slowly but without wincing or indicating any pain—and extended his hand to El, his face aglow and smile inviting.

She studied him fondly for a minute, her eyes catching sight of the dancing couple on the TV and then to the hand held out in the open

air.

“Dance with me,” Mike said lightly.

El grinned, all thoughts of soup and cozying up forgotten as she looked up at this man, at this *wonderful* , wonderful man. Wordlessly, she reached up and took his outstretched hand in her own, slowly rising up and walking with him to the center of the cabin’s small living room. The music of the film played softly in the background, the snow falling gently outside.

El reached her free hand up, gently clasping onto the back of his neck as his own wrapped around her waist. Mike brought their intertwined hands up in the middle, pressing softly between their chests.

Their gazes locked, their hearts swimming with love, they danced—swaying delicately around the living room to the music of the film.

There was a quiet joy to this, El knew it as well as she knew anything. They weren’t racing against the clock anymore, they weren’t fighting for their lives. No, they’d survived all that and were onto something better, something even more life changing than all that they’d been through.

“Hi,” she smiled, heart glowing and nerves jumping out of her throat. Mike grinned back at her, his cheeks blushing and ears rosy.

“Hi,” he whispered.

And all of a sudden El was taken back in time, back to the day they met. Back to when she was Eleanor, when she was simply frequenting her favorite coffee shop on the way to her shift at the bookstore. Back when she was afraid to make eye contact lest someone recognize her. Back when she was alone and lost and unsure of every aspect of her life except for Max and the knowledge she could never share who she really was.

She was taken back to that tall, dreamy guy staring up at her as she returned unbought books in the stacks, back to when she first laid eyes on him and *knew* . Knew that he was important, knew that there was something different, *knew* that something had shifted in her

world without her knowledge. Of course, at that time she didn't know how or what or who—but she knew nonetheless.

Mike was beaming at her now, just as he did then, with not only the same admiration but also newfound love and joy and happiness.

They swayed gently around the room, their socks churning up static against the carpet and a chill pinching at their ears, and they were happy. Together and happy.

Everything had been said, everything had been done. And with one final grin, El reached up on her toes, lips softly meeting his, entering the next great adventure of her life.

Notes for the Chapter:

Wow look at that, ya girl finished it. About six months late, but finished nonetheless. (And coincidentally, today marks exactly one year since I started writing it, so how 'bout that!)

Seriously though if you're reading this, thank you??? Thanks for giving this a chance, I really hoped you liked it and if you didn't that's okay, it was my first time writing and I wanted to give it a nice college try. I'm trying to get back in the swing of writing every day--and I do have a boatload of ideas--so look out for that on here! (or come chat with me on tumblr @janes-mike).

Thank you so much to everybody who read this ridiculous, cheesy, fun story about two idiots in love. I'm looking forward to doing it again and again :)

-AJ